

ARDAK

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Publisher:

writerskart

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Ardak

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ISBN: 978-93-0917-025-6

*Cover Design & Book Layout by **Prashant Kumar***

Printed in India

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THROUGH THE LENS OF FIRE

I was born into silence. Not the silence of peace, but the silence that follows screams when the air is too tired to carry any more sound. I was five when I learned that silence could be louder than noise, when soldiers came into our neighborhood, and my father's voice was swallowed by the night. Later, in November 2019, my brothers followed him, their blood spilled onto the streets of Tehran during protests no one wanted to remember but no one could ever forget. That month tore a hole through me that never closed.

Since then, it has only been my mother and me, two women in a house that always feels emptier than its walls can hold.

I was twenty-two when I first held a camera like a weapon. My profession is photojournalism, but in truth, it feels more like defiance. To capture truth in a country that survives on lies is to carry fire in your bare hands.

In December 2019, the month after my brothers' deaths, I found someone on Twitter. Or perhaps it is more honest to say: he found

me. His name was Asim. He was from Kashmir; a land that carried its own wounds like mine, carved deep into its mountains. I do not know if it was grief that recognized grief, or loneliness that reached out to loneliness, but when I first spoke to him, I felt a spark of warmth in a world that had gone cold.

He called me Mariya. I called him jaanam. My soul. My dearest.

With Asim, words were enough to bridge oceans. We built a world inside text messages and late-night calls. When panic suffocated him, I stayed awake until dawn, whispering through his insomnia. When I wanted to collapse under the weight of my own despair, he teased me gently, telling me I ate orange ice cream like a child. He worried constantly about me walking bareheaded into protests. He pleaded, "Jaanam, just cover your head. Just once. For me." But I never listened. My hair was my flap of defiance.

We dreamt of meeting one day, two broken pieces trying to find their whole, but the borders of politics, religion, and war kept us apart. Still, I loved him, fiercely and fully, with a love that did not need touch to prove itself real.

On 13 September 2022, Mahsa Amini was arrested. By the 16th, she was dead. My lens caught the truth of her bruised body and the fire that followed in the streets. By evening, I was arrested too. They took me at around 7:45 p.m. and released me weeks later, on 3 October. My bruises faded, but the fear never did.

I kept photographing. I kept writing. I kept resisting. But every picture brought me closer to death. On 14 January 2023, one of the IRGC guards cornered me and broke me in a way I never confessed, not even to Asim. Shame sat like acid in my throat. I carried it silently, pretending I was still whole.

One week later, on 21 January 2023, they shot me. Five bullets in the stomach, one in the heart. They thought they were silencing me,

but I had already written my truth into letters, sealed in envelopes, and left them behind for the boy across the mountains who had become my jaanam.

Asim never knew the whole story until those letters reached him, five months after I was gone. He only knew of my death from a text my mother sent, her grief spilling into his phone screen.

This memoir is my voice from beyond. A girl of twenty-two, a camera in her hand, love in her heart, and a country that chose bullets over freedom.

Shadows of November

I have always believed that grief is inherited, that it seeps through blood like an unwanted legacy. I was born into a house where loss lived quietly in the corners, like a guest no one dared to ask to leave. My father's silence lingered long before his death, he was a man who smiled rarely, laughed cautiously, and always seemed to carry a weight invisible to the rest of us. When I was five, he disappeared into the belly of the night, taken by men who never announced their names but whose boots spoke louder than their mouths.

My mother told me he was "gone." At five, I thought gone meant he would return. I used to watch the doorway, waiting for him, rehearsing the words I would say: Where did you go, Baba? Why were you gone so long? But he never came. At twelve, I realized gone meant buried somewhere I would never be allowed to see.

His absence became part of the furniture of our house, like the dent in the sofa cushions, like the creak in the floorboards. It was always there, shaping how we lived, but never spoken of too loudly. My mother wore her widowhood like a veil; visible, constant, and impossible to remove.

I grew up with my brothers, both older, both louder than the silence that haunted our home. Reza, the eldest, was two years older than me. He had the kind of smile that made you forget the heaviness of the world for a moment. He was protective in a way that sometimes suffocated me but always made me feel safe. The middle one, Arad, was just a year older than me. He was wild, quick to laugh, quick to fight, always challenging the world as if daring it to take him down.

They were my shields, my playmates, my companions in a city that always seemed tense. Tehran has a way of teaching children that laughter is a dangerous act; every giggle is a protest, every smile a refusal to surrender. My brothers taught me to laugh anyway. They told me that to laugh was to spit in the face of fear.

We had so little, but we made games out of scraps. We played football with a half-deflated ball in the alley behind our house, our shoes kicking up dust, our voices carrying louder than we should have let them. My mother used to scold us; “Keep your voices down, the neighbors will report us!”, but she could never hide the tiny smile tugging at the corners of her lips.

Even then, we all knew the rules: you survive by being silent, by not drawing attention to yourself. But my brothers believed in living a little louder, even if only for a moment.

Then November 2019 came.

I was nineteen then, a student with more dreams than sense, carrying my camera like a talisman. That month changed me in ways I am still learning to count.

The protests swept through Iran like wildfire, sparked by sudden fuel price hikes but rooted in decades of exhaustion. Crowds filled the streets, voices rose, chants erupted like storm waves. My brothers were among them. They had always been braver than I was, or perhaps just more reckless.

On the night of November 16th, I heard the first gunshots. Our house was close enough to the main streets to taste the tear gas that leaked through the window cracks. The air burned my throat, made my eyes water. My mother pressed me into her chest, as though the rhythm of her heartbeat could drown out the chaos outside.

But my brothers weren't home.

I waited by the door until dawn. My hands shook, not from cold, but from the fear that each second stretched the distance between me and them. My mother didn't cry that night. She was too strong, or perhaps too numb, for tears. Instead, she sat by the stove, whispering prayers that felt like bargaining.

By sunrise, the news came. My brothers had been shot.

There are no words in any language to describe what it feels like to hear that your blood has been spilled on asphalt. I wanted to run, to see them, to touch their faces one last time. But my mother pulled me back, her fingers digging into my wrist. "You cannot go," she whispered. "They will kill you too."

I didn't see their bodies. The state took them, like it had taken my father. No funerals, no graves, only names etched into our hearts.

From that day, it was just my mother and me.

The house grew heavier with absence. I would walk past their empty rooms and feel their shadows clinging to the walls. I would dream of them at night, sometimes alive and laughing, sometimes bleeding in the streets, and wake with a scream lodged in my throat. My mother never scolded me for crying. She only held me tighter, as though we could keep each other from falling apart.

But grief is a thief. It steals not only the people you lose but also the version of yourself you were when they were alive. I was no longer the younger sister who was teased about her stubbornness or coaxed into eating the last piece of bread. I became the only child of a grieving

mother. That role was heavy, suffocating, and yet the only one left for me to play.

It was during those days of mourning that I began to understand the camera differently. Until then, it had been a tool for curiosity, for capturing faces, sunsets, stolen smiles in the bazaar. After November, it became my weapon. If the state could steal bodies and silence voices, then I would steal moments back from them. A photograph could not bring my brothers home, but it could keep them from disappearing entirely.

I remember taking my first picture after their deaths. It was of my mother's hands. She was peeling an orange, her fingers trembling, the juice dripping down her wrists. There was something sacred in that fragility. When I developed the photo, I saw her grief etched into every wrinkle of her skin. That picture still sits in my desk drawer, a reminder of the moment I decided that my lens would become my voice.

Photography became the only way I knew to fight back. My professors at the university had warned me; "Careful, Mariya, pictures can be more dangerous than guns." I didn't believe them until I saw how the security forces ripped cameras out of the hands of students during the protests, smashing lenses on the pavement as though truth itself could be shattered.

Still, I kept my camera close. It was a shield, a weapon, and a friend.

But no matter how much I tried to bury myself in work, November left scars too deep to ignore. The streets still whispered their names. Every protest chant carried their echoes. And every time I looked at my mother, I saw a woman holding the weight of three graves without ever seeing a tombstone.

Sometimes, late at night, I would hear her whisper to them, as though they could hear her through the walls of death. She would ask if they were warm, if they were together, if they were at peace. She

never asked why they had been taken; that question had no answer worth speaking aloud.

I began to write in a notebook during those months, letters addressed to no one, letters I would later realize were the beginning of my habit of writing to Asim. I wrote about the emptiness, about how I wanted to scream but had no mouth to scream with. I wrote about how photographs were the only proof I had left that life had once been worth capturing.

One entry read:

If my father's silence was inherited, then perhaps my brothers' defiance can be too. Perhaps through my camera I can carry them forward, even if only in shadows.

But even with those words, the truth is simpler: I was just a girl whose family had been broken, trying to stitch herself back together with pictures and prayers.

November 2019 was the month I stopped believing in safety. It was the month I realized that the state was not a protector but a predator. It was the month I decided that silence was no longer survivable, even if speaking out meant death.

And yet, it was also the month I began to grow closer to my mother than I had ever been. She was all I had left. We leaned on each other not because we were strong, but because if either of us let go, we would fall apart. I learned to make her tea the way she liked it, extra sugar, almost syrupy. She learned to read my silences and when to press a kiss to my forehead instead of asking me questions.

We carried each other through that winter like two survivors clinging to the same piece of wreckage after a shipwreck.

I was nineteen and I thought my life had ended already. I did not know then that life had one more cruel gift waiting for me; that in the

ashes of that grief, someone far away, across mountains and borders,
was waiting to speak my name for the first time.

But that was December.

November belonged to shadows.

The First Message

It was December 2019, just weeks after my brothers had been killed, when my world stretched beyond Tehran for the first time in years. The protests had been crushed, the air still carried the bitterness of tear gas, and my mother and I were stumbling through our days like shadows of ourselves.

Most evenings I sat in front of my old laptop, scrolling through Twitter. I didn't post often, only sometimes sharing photos or fragments of words; grief disguised as poetry, rage disguised as questions. It wasn't safe to speak openly, but it was unbearable to stay silent. So I learned the language of suggestion, of metaphors, of photographs that told truths without captions.

One night, I posted a picture I had taken in November: the asphalt still wet from rain, smeared with blood that had half-dried into the cracks. I captioned it simply: The street remembers what we are not allowed to say.

That was the night Asim found me.

A notification appeared: a retweet, then a reply. His profile photo was blurry, a young man with dark eyes. His reply was short, almost hesitant: Our streets remember too, jaan. You are not alone.

That word, "jaan" hit me strangely. In Persian, jaan means life, soul, beloved. But in his tone, I felt a gentleness, as though he had reached across mountains and borders to place a hand on my shoulder.

I didn't reply immediately. I clicked on his profile instead, scrolling through his posts. He wrote about Kashmir, about curfews, about soldiers at every corner. His words were a strange mirror of mine; grief and defiance woven together.

Finally, I replied: Your streets and mine speak the same language.

That was our beginning. Two wounded lands, two young voices, stumbling into each other in the dark.

Over the next few days, we began to exchange more messages. At first it was about politics, about what it felt like to live under occupation and repression. His words were sharp, but beneath them was a tenderness I did not expect. He asked me if I was safe. No one had asked me that in months; not really, not in a way that felt like they cared about the answer.

I told him about my brothers, about how I still dreamed of them. He told me about his insomnia and panic attacks.

Our pain became our bridge.

He called me Mariya. Just my name. But I wanted something more. So one evening, after he stayed awake with me for hours, listening as I whispered memories of my brothers, I typed: You are my jaanam now.

He replied almost instantly: Jaanam. I never thought anyone would ever call me that.

From then on, that was his name to me. Not Asim, not stranger, not friend. Jaanam. My soul.

We began to talk about ordinary things too; food, books, the way winter crept into our rooms. He teased me once when I told him I loved orange ice cream. You eat it like a child, don't you? he said. I laughed so hard my mother came into the room, worried something had happened.

It was strange, that laughter. It had been absent from my life since November, since the blood on the asphalt. Yet here I was, laughing at a boy's teasing from a land I had never seen.

He confessed to me one night that he couldn't sleep without panic clawing at his chest. His heart raced, his breath shortened. "Sometimes I feel like I am suffocating even though the room is full of air," he said.

I didn't know much about panic attacks, but I knew about suffocation. I knew about nights when grief pressed so heavy on my chest I thought I would stop breathing. So I stayed awake with him, speaking softly, telling him about the sound of my mother's prayers, about the way Tehran lights glimmered in the distance. Slowly, his words slowed, his breath evened. By dawn, he was asleep.

That became our ritual. I carried him through his nights, and he carried me through my days.

Yet, even in our growing intimacy, there was tension. He pleaded with me often: Jaanam, cover your head. Please. When you go out with your camera, at least cover it. It will keep you safe.

I refused every time.

"My hair is the only freedom I can show in public," I told him. "If they want me to hide it, I'll show it louder."

He sighed, frustrated but gentle. One day, I want to touch that hair, to see it fall across your shoulders. But only if you are alive, jaanam. Only if you are safe.

I smiled at his words, though they ached. Because deep down, I knew safety was already an illusion.

We dreamt about meeting in person. I told him about the streets of Tehran, the smell of roasted corn in winter, the sound of shopkeepers calling out their prices. He told me about the mountains of Kashmir, how snow made the whole valley glow, how the silence there was both beautiful and suffocating.

"Maybe one day," he said. "Maybe one day we will sit by Dal Lake and eat orange ice cream together."

"Only if you promise not to tease me for eating it too fast," I replied.

He laughed; "I promise nothing".

But always, beneath the laughter and the tenderness, there was the shadow of grief. I told him things I hadn't told anyone; not even my mother. How sometimes I still set two extra plates at dinner by mistake. How I felt guilty for surviving when my brothers had not.

He told me things I could hear only because I was far away. How he sometimes stood at his window during curfew and imagined what it would be like to be free, to walk without fear. How he hated himself for the way his hands shook when soldiers passed.

We carried each other through those confessions. We stitched each other together, word by word, across an invisible thread that no border could cut.

Looking back now, I realize how quickly I fell in love. It wasn't gradual. It wasn't careful. It was like breathing after drowning, immediate, desperate, necessary.

In him, I found not just comfort but recognition. He knew what it meant to lose, to fear, to ache for a future that seemed impossible. And yet, with him, I also found hope. For the first time since November, I began to imagine a tomorrow that wasn't only shadow.

He once asked me, Why me, Mariya? Why call me jaanam?

I thought about it before replying. Then I typed: Because when I speak to you, my grief feels less heavy. Because you remind me that my

heart is still capable of beating for someone else. Because even across mountains, you have become my home.

There was a long pause. Then his reply came: If I am your home, then know that you are my breath. Without you, I cannot sleep. With you, I remember why I should keep waking up.

December passed in that way. Tehran was cold, my mother quieter than ever, but my nights were filled with messages and laughter and whispered promises.

If November had been the month of shadows, December was the month of light flickering back into my life. A fragile light, yes, one easily threatened by the storm around us. But it was enough.

Enough to remind me that even in a country of graves and silence, love could still bloom. Enough to remind me that across a border I could never cross, someone's heart beat in rhythm with mine.

And so it began; not just a love story, but a lifeline.

Oranges in Winter

I never liked winter. Tehran in December always felt like a graveyard of smoke, exhaust, and broken promises. The cold clung to my skin as if the streets themselves wanted me to carry their weight. My mother used to say that winter teaches patience, but I knew she was only trying to find poetry in the ache of our survival.

December 2019 was the month I first spoke to Asim. A stranger who appeared on my phone screen, tucked inside a Twitter message, but somehow, he arrived with the softness of a long-lost companion. His first words were not grand, not poetic, not rehearsed; they were simple: “I saw your photo from the protest. Do you still breathe?”

I remember staring at that sentence, wondering why it struck me like a stone breaking glass. Do you still breathe? He wasn’t asking for a headline, not for drama, not for my work. He was asking for me.

I replied, hesitant, “Barely. And you?”

He said, “I don’t sleep much. I’m always counting hours instead of stars.”

That was how I learned about his insomnia, about his nights in Kashmir where silence itself was bruised by checkpoints and shadows.

He told me about lying awake, listening to the hum of ceiling fans, wishing for peace to creep into his veins. I told him about Tehran's suffocating smog, about how my camera sometimes felt heavier than my body, and how carrying grief through a lens was another kind of insomnia.

It didn't take long before I called him jaanam. My jaanam who whispered through wires, whose voice I could only imagine at first, but it steadied me. Whenever he laughed; though his laughter was rare, it sounded like a river breaking through stone.

He teased me often. One evening, when I sent him a photo of myself eating orange ice cream outside a tiny shop in Shahr-e-Rey, he texted back: "You look like a child who's just stolen happiness."

I rolled my eyes, typing fast: "I like orange ice cream. Don't mock me."

"I don't mock," he replied. "I adore. My jaanam, you carry the world on your shoulders, but then you hold an ice cream cone like it's enough. Do you know how beautiful that is?"

No one had ever spoken to me like that. Not the men in Tehran, not the classmates who left me behind, not even the memories of my father or brothers. He saw me in fragments, the journalist who ran into fire, the daughter who cooked lentils with her mother, the girl who still chased sweetness on winter days. And he accepted every fragment.

We built our nights around messages, around calls when the internet was kind. Sometimes he would break down in the middle of a conversation, his voice trembling as panic attacked his chest. I learned to breathe with him, whispering, "Inhale, jaanam. Hold it. Exhale." I'd stay awake until the tremors in his words subsided, even if my own body begged for rest.

Other nights, it was me who cracked open. The November killings had carved scars inside me, and I confessed things I never dared speak

aloud. About the blood on pavements, about mothers clutching empty shoes, about my own family buried under that silence. Asim never judged. He listened as if my grief was his own, as if distance could not dilute its weight.

We promised each other a meeting, one day, in another season, in another city. Maybe in Istanbul, maybe in Delhi, maybe somewhere we could both breathe without watching for uniforms. He said he would bring me a bag of oranges, just to tease me. I said I would photograph his insomnia until it looked like art.

But deep inside, I think we both feared the same truth: some meetings never arrive, no matter how often you dream them.

The City That Watches

Tehran has always been a city of eyes. Eyes painted on walls, eyes hidden in cameras, eyes peering from windows, eyes stitched into the uniforms of men who think they own us. By 2020, I had already learned to live under their gaze. But after Mahsa Amini's death, that gaze became unbearable, it was no longer watchful, it was predatory.

The city grew restless in September 2022. The air was no different, heavy with exhaust and dust, but something shifted in the rhythm of footsteps, in the way whispers traveled from one shop to another. People stopped lowering their voices when they spoke of injustice. Even the silence in Tehran seemed swollen, ready to burst.

I told Asim about it before the world knew her name.

"Something is coming, jaanam," I whispered during a late-night call. My room was dark except for the faint blue glow of my phone screen. My mother slept in the next room, and I kept my voice low, though fear made it tremble.

"What do you mean?" His voice, soft and tired, crackled across the fragile line.

“They can’t cage us forever. I feel it.”

He paused. I imagined him sitting at his desk in Srinagar, restless hands running over books he couldn’t finish. He sighed. “Revolutions eat their children. Don’t let it eat you, jaanam.”

I laughed bitterly. “It already did. My father, my brothers—they’re bones in the soil of November. What’s left to lose?”

He didn’t answer for a long moment. Then, quietly, “You, I could lose you.”

That silence stretched between us, thick and unspeakable. I wanted to tell him I was invincible, that cameras were shields, that truth protected those who carried it. But I couldn’t lie. My pulse betrayed me. I wanted to live, but more than that; I wanted to be seen, remembered, understood. And Asim, my jaanam, was the only one who saw me fully.

It was around this time that he began to plead with me about the hijab.

“At least cover your head when you go out to shoot,” he said once, almost angrily. “Don’t give them a reason.”

I shook my head, though he couldn’t see me. “Jaanam, they don’t need reasons. They invent them. Besides, my hair is the last thing I own. I will not let them bury it under their cloth.”

“You’re stubborn,” he muttered.

“And you love me for it,” I teased, trying to lighten the heaviness. He sighed again. “Yes. And that’s the problem.”

Those days were filled with contradictions; hope and despair, fire and mourning, laughter and dread. I still bought orange ice cream sometimes, just to send him pictures. He said I ate it like a child, and I said he worried like an old man. Between jokes and panic, between tenderness and fear, we kept each other alive.

Neither of us knew that Tehran was already writing my ending.

The Girl Who Never Went Home

September 13, 2022, began like any other Tuesday. The streets of Tehran carried their usual orchestra of horns, vendors shouting, and the metallic ache of buses coughing smoke into the air. I left the apartment with my camera hidden under my scarf, my mother's eyes following me like a prayer she couldn't speak aloud.

By afternoon, the city cracked open.

Her name was Mahsa Amini. She was twenty-two, like me. She could have been my sister, my reflection in another mirror, another city, another life. But on that day, she became a prisoner of Tehran's morality police. Arrested for "improper hijab." Arrested for hair. Arrested for the simple audacity of existing freely.

I wasn't there when they dragged her away, but I was there in the aftermath. A crowd had gathered outside Kasra Hospital. Rumors ran faster than truth: she was beaten, she was in a coma, she would not survive. Mothers wept openly; fathers clenched fists against walls. My

lens trembled in my hands as I clicked shot after shot; faces of fear, faces of fury, faces that could no longer stay silent.

That night, I called Asim

“Jaanam,” I whispered, my throat raw from smoke and shouting. “They have killed her already, even if she still breathes.”

He said nothing at first. I could hear his uneven breathing, the quiet panic of someone thousands of miles away but bleeding all the same. Finally, he spoke: “Promise me you won’t follow this too far.”

I laughed, hollow. “How far is too far? A photograph? A headline? A grave?”

“Promise me,” he repeated, his voice breaking.

I closed my eyes. I wanted to promise, to wrap him in the safety he craved, to tell him that love could shield me from bullets and batons. But lies taste bitter on my tongue. So I said the only thing I could: “I promise nothing. But I will call you tomorrow.

On September 16, she died.

The city erupted like a body breaking chains. Women tore off their hijabs in the streets, flames devoured cloth, slogans rose like thunder. My camera became my weapon, my witness. I pressed the shutter until my fingers burned, until the smoke blurred my vision

At around 7:45 that evening, as the protests swelled near Valiasr Square, they came for me. IRGC guards, their boots heavy with arrogance, their rifles gleaming like curses. One of them yanked the camera from my hands, another twisted my arm until I screamed.

I remember the ground rushing up, the taste of blood in my mouth, the sound of people scattering. Then; darkness.

When I opened my eyes again, I was inside a van, wrists bound, my mother’s name lodged in my throat like a stone.

I thought of Asim. I thought of his insomnia, his shaking hands, his voice when he said “Don’t let it eat you.” I wanted to tell him I was alive. I wanted to tell him I still breathed.

But that night, in the belly of Tehran’s prison machine, I learned that breathing is not the same as living.

The Walls Have No Windows

Prison doesn't begin with iron bars: it begins with silence. The kind of silence that follows you inside a van when the doors slam shut and the city disappears. That night, September 16, 2022, I entered a silence I would not escape for seventeen days.

The first cell they put me in was painted the color of despair, pale green walls flaking like diseased skin. A bulb hung overhead, buzzing faintly, as if it too wanted to escape. There were no windows, no clocks, no markers of time. Only the shuffle of guards' boots, the occasional groan of a door, and the weight of my own thoughts pressing against me.

They took my camera. They took my notebook. They took my voice whenever they dragged me into interrogation.

"Who do you work for?"

"Who pays you?"

"Who gave you orders to photograph?"

I laughed once, and their fists answered. Another time, I remained silent, and they locked me in darkness for what felt like days. The worst was not the beatings, not the hunger, not the thirst; it was

the uncertainty. Would I ever leave? Would my mother ever know where I was? Would Asim wait by his phone until waiting turned into mourning?

In the cold hours of that endless night, I spoke to him in my head. “Jaanam, inhale, hold, exhale,” I whispered, the same words I once used to anchor his panic. Now they became my own lifeline.

On the fourth day, a woman was shoved into my cell. Her hair was matted with blood, her eyes two storms. She whispered Mahsa’s name again and again, like a prayer. We sat back-to-back, sharing warmth in a place where warmth was forbidden. I never learned her name. One morning, she was gone.

Sometimes, the guards mocked me, reading fake messages aloud as if Asim had written them: “She was not worth waiting for. She was foolish. She was dead already.” I closed my eyes and remembered his voice instead; the tenderness, the weariness, the way he called me my stubborn jaanam. Lies cannot kill what love has carved into bone.

Seventeen days blurred into one long ache. My body carried bruises, but my mind carried fire. Each night I imagined the protests outside growing larger, louder, unstoppable. I imagined women burning their scarves, men raising their fists, children shouting names the regime wanted to bury.

And I imagined Asim waiting by his phone, sleepless in Srinagar, scrolling through silence, praying for a message that never came.

On October 3, they released me without ceremony. They pushed me onto a street I barely recognized, and the sky felt too wide after the walls. My legs shook as if freedom itself was unstable.

When I finally reached home, my mother’s arms around me, the first thing I did was grab my phone. My hands trembled as I typed:

“Jaanam. I breathe. I breathe. I breathe.”

The reply came instantly: “Don’t ever stop.”

And just like that, the silence broke.

Flames in the Lens

Freedom after prison is a strange illusion. You walk the streets with sunlight on your face, but the shadows follow you closer than ever. October 2022 tasted of ash and adrenaline. Tehran was alive with fury, and though my body still carried bruises, my hands itched for my camera.

I returned to the protests. I had to. Seventeen days behind walls had only sharpened the truth: silence is another kind of death. My lens became my rebellion, my proof that we had not surrendered. I photographed women tearing scarves into flames, men standing in front of armored trucks with nothing but stones, children holding banners too heavy for their small arms.

Each night, I sent the pictures to foreign outlets under a false name. Each night, I called Asim.

He begged me to stop.

“Jaanam, please. Enough. You’ve already given too much.”

I shook my head, even though he couldn’t see me. “If I stop, Mahsa dies twice. Once in their hands, and again in our silence.”

“And if you die?” His voice cracked. “Then who will I call at night when the walls close in? Who will breathe with me when my chest forgets how?”

His desperation cut deeper than the guards’ fists ever had. I wanted to soothe him, to promise him safety I couldn’t promise myself. Instead, I teased him gently: “Then you’ll find another insomniac with a taste for orange ice cream.”

He didn’t laugh. He only whispered, “There is no other you.”

By December, the regime began executing protestors. I was there: camera hidden under my coat, when mothers collapsed outside Evin Prison, when names were read, when bodies swung into history. My photographs were smuggled out like contraband truths. Every click of the shutter felt like an act of defiance, every frame a bullet aimed at forgetting.

But defiance has a price. The guards knew my face now. They watched the streets not only for protestors, but for me. Sometimes I felt their eyes before I saw them. The city of eyes had narrowed its gaze.

One evening, I told Asim about it.

“I think they’re hunting me,” I whispered over the phone.

He fell silent, then said, “Then let me beg you one last time: stop. Please, jaanam. Stop before I lose you.”

I closed my eyes. I imagined him in Srinagar, his hands trembling as they always did when panic rose, his sleepless eyes searching for me across a distance that could never shrink. My heart ached to obey him. But truth had already claimed me.

“If I stop,” I said, “I will lose myself before you lose me.”

He didn’t reply. Only his breath lingered in the static, fragile and breaking.

I returned to the streets the next morning. My camera was heavy. My love was heavier. And both pulled me towards fire.

The Night That Stole My Voice

January in Tehran is cruel. The cold does not sharpen: it suffocates. It presses into your lungs until every breath feels borrowed. I carried that winter inside me when I went out on January 14, 2023, to photograph yet another protest.

The square was chaos; smoke, slogans, the furious rhythm of feet pounding against asphalt. My camera clicked without pause, each frame another wound carved into memory. Then I felt it; the grip. A hand on my arm, iron-strong, pulling me away from the crowd.

An IRGC guard. His uniform reeked of sweat and gunpowder. His eyes did not see me as human, only as prey.

“Journalist,” he spat, though it sounded more like a curse. He dragged me behind a truck, out of sight of the others. The noise of the protest dimmed, replaced by the sound of my heartbeat hammering in my ears.

I struggled, but his strength was merciless. His hand covered my mouth when I tried to scream. His body pinned mine against the wall. The assault was not just physical; it was theft, the violent robbery of dignity, the attempt to turn me into silence.

When it ended, I fell to the ground, my knees scraping against gravel. He walked away without looking back, as if I were nothing but trash left in an alley

I stayed there for what felt like hours, trembling, unable to cry. The cold air stung, but inside I burned with shame and fury. My camera lay cracked beside me. For the first time, I didn't want to pick it up.

That night, I didn't call Asim. I couldn't. My jaanam, who had bared every fear before me, who leaned on me through his sleepless nights, I couldn't give him this pain. To tell him would have been to let the assault live twice: once on my body, and once in his heart.

So I wrote. I poured it into letters, each word bleeding onto paper, folded carefully, hidden away. Someday, I thought, he might read them. Someday, he might know why my voice faltered, why laughter became harder to find.

When my mother saw me stumble into the apartment that night, she touched my bruised face but asked no questions. Mothers sometimes know when words are too heavy to carry aloud.

I locked my door, curled into myself, and whispered into the darkness: "Jaanam, forgive me. I can't tell you."

But silence is a cruel companion. And it was only the beginning of the end.

Six Shots for a Voice

January 21, 2023, began like every other day I had spent in Tehran since the protests escalated. My body was tired, my mind frayed, but my camera still rested against my chest. I had learned to carry both fear and defiance like a single garment.

The city was tense that morning, as if every street knew what was coming. I did not. Not fully.

By mid-afternoon, the protests swelled near a small square in the city center. I moved through the crowd carefully, my camera hidden, my scarf pulled loosely, my heart pounding in rhythm with the chants. Mothers shouted for justice, teenagers threw stones at armored vehicles, and men and women clutched banners with names that might soon vanish from the world.

Then they came; IRGC guards, their black uniforms like shadows come alive. I ran, not fast enough, and they closed in. One of them grabbed me by the scarf, yanking me backward. Another shoved me into the ground, rifle butt slamming into my side.

I saw the barrel first, then the flash. Six shots ripped through the air. Five in my stomach, one in my heart. Pain exploded through me like

fire in my veins. I fell, the world tilting and folding around me, sounds muffled, cries swallowed by the roar of boots and shouting.

Somewhere in the distance, I imagined Asim calling my name, whispering "Jaanam, please breathe." But the world narrowed, and then; I was falling into darkness.

The crowd scattered. My camera, my tool of defiance, lay crushed nearby. The banners fluttered in the wind like unfinished prayers. My body became a canvas of brutality, and yet, in those final moments, my mind clung to one thing: the love I had shared, the whispers with Asim, the small laughter over orange ice cream.

I never covered my head fully, despite Asim's pleadings. I never hid my voice. I never stopped capturing truth. And in doing so, I became what they feared most: "Seen".

When Asim received the first message from my mother hours later, he did not yet know the full story. She wrote simply:

"My daughter was shot six times, She is gone."

The world shifted for him in that instant. He read the words over and over, refusing to breathe, refusing to believe, his insomnia now permanent, his panic unbound.

It would be five months before he learned everything; the assault, the beatings, the prison, all the moments I had hidden to shield him from grief. Letters I had left behind, carefully written and sent through a courier, revealed the full weight of what I had carried, of what I had endured, and of how deeply I loved him.

Even in death, I spoke to him. Even in silence, I tried to protect him, guide him, love him.

And he would never forget me.

Letters from Beyond

Five months had passed since Tehran had taken me from him. Five months of endless nights for Asim; endless scrolling through silence, endless staring at the phone that never rang. Each sunrise was a betrayal, each sunset a reminder that I was gone.

Then, one cold morning in Srinagar, a small courier envelope arrived. Nothing about it seemed remarkable at first. It bore my handwriting, familiar and tender, and he recognized it instantly. His hands trembled as he tore it open.

Inside were letters, dozens of them, each folded carefully, each inked in my familiar scrawl. He did not know I had written them while in prison, while bleeding, while bruised and trembling; but I had. Each letter carried my thoughts, my fears, my laughter, my love, my defiance.

He read first about the assault on January 14, 2023. I had never told him. Not in texts, not in calls, not even through photographs. He learned that I had been violated, forced into silence in ways he could not have imagined. He read the words I had hidden, the words I had saved for him, my jaanam, until I could no longer speak them aloud.

Tears fell freely. He sank into a chair, clutching the letters, shaking, whispering my name over and over: "Mariya... my jaanam..."

Then he read about prison, September 16 to October 3, 2022, the days of darkness, the bruises, the hunger, the constant fear. He understood why I had lied when I told him I was safe, why I had whispered assurances instead of truth. Every confession was written for him to find, five months too late, but somehow exactly when he needed it most.

He read my love letters, the teasing about orange ice cream, the promises of meeting in some distant city, the whispered plans of a life we had never had. He understood then that all the laughter, all the small warmth between us, had been a shield, for me, and for him.

By the time he reached the last letters, he could no longer see clearly. The sun of Srinagar had risen outside his window, but he sat in darkness, clutching my words, letting them bleed into his heart. He realized that even though they had taken my body, my spirit had reached him. My voice had crossed mountains and borders, defying death.

He whispered to himself what he had whispered so many nights before: "I will never forget you, jaanam. Never. Not in this life, not in the next."

And in that room, with letters from a voice that could no longer speak, he felt my presence, my love, and my defiance. Even beyond the violence, beyond the bullets, beyond the prisons, we were still together, in the spaces where grief meets memory, in the silence of love that death cannot touch.

For Asim, I was no longer just Mariya, no longer just a girl from Tehran with a camera and a stubborn heart. I had become every photograph he would ever see, every story he would ever remember, every breath he would take. I had become his jaanam, forever.

Epilogue – The Light She Left Behind

Mariya was gone, but the streets of Tehran remembered her. Her camera, once an extension of her hand, had captured more than protests and executions, it had captured courage, defiance, and the fragile pulse of a city that refused to stay silent. Each photograph she left behind became a testimony, a proof that life, even under oppression, still dared to scream.

For Asim, the letters were a bridge across impossible distance. They held her voice, her laughter, her pain, and her love. Each word reminded him that grief was not only an ending, it was a continuation of what she had begun. Through her words, he lived her defiance, her stubborn bravery, and the tenderness she had always reserved for him.

In Srinagar, he would walk the streets at night, holding her letters, imagining her beside him, teasing him about orange ice cream, whispering “jaanam” into his ear. Sometimes he would speak to the wind, hoping that somehow it carried his words back to Tehran, to her spirit.

Mariya's mother, though broken by loss, became a keeper of her daughter's legacy. She showed the world the photographs Mariya had taken, spoke of the courage that no uniform could suppress, and preserved the letters meant for Asim, ensuring that the girl who had loved fiercely would not be forgotten.

And in the hearts of thousands, Mariya became more than a journalist. She became a symbol, a voice for those silenced, a witness for those threatened, and a reminder that even in the darkest corners, love and courage could burn bright.

Asim never stopped calling her jaanam. He never stopped reading her letters, tracing her handwriting like a lifeline. And though the streets she walked now remembered her in silence, he carried her alive in every heartbeat, in every breath, in every photograph he would show to the world in her honor.

Death had taken her body, but her spirit remained untamed. It surged in the protests, in the camera shutters, in whispers across cities and mountains. And for those who saw her photographs, who read her letters, who felt her presence through memory and love, Mariya was not gone. She had simply become eternal.

The light she left behind was fierce, unyielding, and impossible to forget.

2 Letters from the Last Sunrise

Ahmad had stopped sleeping properly months ago. Nights stretched long and thin over his small room in Srinagar, curling into corners that smelled of old paper and dust. Sometimes, he would lie flat on the mattress, arms stretched above his head, staring at the ceiling fan turning too slowly, imagining it slicing through the darkness, hoping it would cut the anxiety into pieces small enough to ignore. But it never did. The panic attacks came like sudden storms, jagged and merciless, leaving his chest raw, his throat tight, his hands trembling over nothing, over air.

It was in one of these sleepless nights, scrolling through Twitter with a trembling thumb, that he first saw her. Zehra. Her profile picture: a woman with a sharp gaze and a crooked smile, the kind that looked like it knew every secret of the world and refused to tell anyone. Her bio was short, unadorned: journalist, dreamer, stubborn. There was something in the way she wrote a single line about a protest in Tehran that made him pause.

He sent a message. A simple one. "Hi. I read your thread on the protests. It's... brave."

And she replied almost instantly.

"Thanks. Brave or stupid? Sometimes it's hard to tell."

The conversation began lightly, tweets about books, music, favorite coffee shops, the endless absurdity of life under so many rules, but it didn't stay light for long. By the second week, they were sharing secrets. Small ones at first. Ahmad told her about his insomnia, the crushing anxiety that made mornings almost impossible. Zehra told him about her first protest, the fear and exhilaration tangled together.

There was an intimacy in the way she typed, the pauses, the emojis that never felt childish, the questions that seemed to ask for truth rather than pleasantries. Video calls started, clumsy, glitchy, jittering over poor internet connections. But Ahmad found something in her gaze on the screen that made the world soften, made the room feel larger, less suffocating. He found something in her laugh that filled the spaces inside him where panic often lived.

"You sound tired tonight," she said one evening in late 2019, her eyes flicking to the side as if watching him even through the pixels.

"I didn't sleep," he admitted. His voice cracked slightly. He hated when it did.

"You'll sleep someday. Or at least, I'll make sure you try." She smiled, a small, lopsided grin. And somehow, that made him feel like maybe he could survive another day.

They texted constantly, every morning, afternoon, night. Sometimes he'd wake to 20+ messages, small fragments of her day, questions about his classes, links to articles she thought he'd like. By evening, they were on a call, and it felt like she was there in the room with him, in the quiet shadows where no one else existed. He told her about his

panic attacks, the ones he couldn't control. She told him to breathe, to count, to repeat her voice in his head until it replaced the storm inside.

The first time he realized he loved her, he didn't even recognize it at first. It wasn't in a moment of passion or confession. It was when he stayed up all night watching her laugh at something small on a screen, and for the first time in months, he didn't feel the panic crawling under his ribs. It was quiet, sudden, undeniable. He wanted her in the world beyond the pixels, wanted to reach through the screen and make everything real.

She became his anchor, his constant, his reason to check the clock, his reason to send one more message, to hold on. And for her part, Zehra seemed to love his silence sometimes, the way he listened more than he spoke, the way he didn't judge, the way he let her share without expecting anything in return.

Winter came to Srinagar, and Ahmad found himself imagining her in Tehran, walking through streets he had only read about, streets that sometimes seemed far too dangerous for someone so fragile, someone who laughed like the world could not touch her. He begged her sometimes, jokingly at first, then with a rawness he could barely mask, to be careful. She would roll her eyes in reply, tease him, but sometimes, just sometimea, her gaze faltered, even over the video call.

Late nights, he would record himself breathing, trying to calm himself before sleep, and she would play her favorite song softly in the background, a lullaby across continents. He never told her how much it helped, how much it saved him. And she never asked. They just shared these moments, fragile threads of existence woven tightly across screens, across lives that felt too heavy for the individual but manageable together.

And yet, even in these early days, there was a shadow. Anxiety, that ever-present undertow, whispered constantly. What if she vanished?

What if the world was too cruel? Ahmad's mind often spun, images of her hurt, of letters unsent, of a life interrupted. He fought these visions with words, messages, calls, laughter, but sometimes, when the screens went dark, he felt the old panic rise like a wave that no song could calm.

By the end of 2020, their love had taken a form both strange and intimate. They were lovers, yes, but also guardians of each other's sanity, each other's confidants, each other's reason for existing in the dark hours. Ahmad would sometimes imagine reaching out, breaking through the screen, holding her hand in the crowded streets of Tehran. She would sometimes whisper into the camera, "One day, you will."

That promise, soft, unformed, suspended in the air between them, was enough. It was enough to keep him breathing. It was enough to make the darkness bearable.

Section 2:

Dreams of the

Future

By 2021, Ahmad had finished his Master's in Political Science. Graduation wasn't a celebration; it was a small, quiet acknowledgment of survival. His world still felt heavy, weighted with nights that never ended, panic attacks that clawed at his chest, and insomnia that left him staring at the ceiling long after midnight. And yet, through all of it, there was Zehra.

Every message from her carried warmth across continents, a tether he clung to in the storm of his mind. Every video call was a sanctuary. And every time his chest tightened, every time the world pressed too close, she would whisper, soft and steady, almost a mantra: "Jaanam... breathe. Jaanam... I'm here."

He hated how much those two syllables, "jaanam", could soothe him, could anchor him, could make the panic retreat like a tide at the hint of her voice. He knew it was ridiculous, knew it was dependent, knew it was dangerous in its intensity, but he couldn't stop himself. He needed her voice. He needed her.

And she needed him too, though perhaps in a different way. Zehra had become a field journalist, moving through Tehran's streets with a kind of fearless recklessness that terrified him. He listened as she recounted protests, arrests, and the chaos of the world she refused to ignore. Each story made his chest tighten, each laugh she let slip during a video call loosened it again.

"You know," he said one night, voice trembling slightly, "sometimes I think you're completely crazy."

She grinned, the corners of her eyes crinkling. "And you love me for it, jaanam."

"I, what? I..." He tried to argue, but she laughed before he could finish, and it was impossible to stay angry.

Their teasing was endless, a delicate dance that gave them both a sense of normalcy. Ahmad found it impossible to resist poking fun at her quirks. "You really don't need three scoops of strawberry ice cream at midnight, you know," he said one night, smirking as she held a bowl up to the camera.

"I do too," she shot back, her eyes sparkling. "It's essential, don't you dare judge me."

"You're such a child," he said, shaking his head. "A grown woman eating strawberry ice cream like she's six years old."

"And you love it," she teased, and he groaned because she was right. He loved it. Loved her ridiculousness, her stubbornness, her life that refused to fit neatly into rules or expectations.

By 2022, their love had grown into something more than just shared jokes and nightly songs. It had become survival. Ahmad's panic was no longer solitary; it was shared. Zehra's bravery was no longer distant; it was entwined with his heartbeat, with every anxious shiver that ran through him during the night. When the Mahsa Amini protests began to stir, Zehra was there in the middle of it. She refused to

cover her hair despite Ahmad's pleading. Every call became a delicate negotiation between fear and autonomy.

"Jaanam," she said one evening, voice trembling as he panicked over yet another message about the streets of Tehran. "I'm careful, I promise. I'm still careful. Don't... don't hurt yourself worrying about me."

"I just..." His words caught in his throat. He hated the panic. Hated how powerless he felt across thousands of miles. "I don't want you... I can't..." He stopped, frustrated at the inability to form sentences.

"You're always like this," she said softly, almost smiling. "Your chest gets tight and you forget words. That's okay, jaanam. I'm here. You're here."

Even in the midst of terror, her voice, her attention, her small affirmations held him steady. And he, in turn, held her close through the screens, teasing her, laughing at her strawberry ice cream, calling her a child, keeping the world slightly lighter, slightly warmer.

They dreamed endlessly of meeting in person. Ahmad imagined the streets of Tehran in spring, the city alive with scent and sound, Zehra's hair whipping in the wind, her laughter loud and untamed. Zehra imagined Srinagar in autumn, the mountains sharp against the sky, leaves falling like confetti around them as they finally met. "Someday," they promised. "We will."

But even in their laughter, even in their love, shadows loomed. Protests grew, streets filled with courage and danger. Zehra's defiance, her refusal to hide, her insistence on truth, was both a beacon and a threat. Ahmad's panic thrived in the spaces between their calls, in the hours when he couldn't hear her, couldn't touch her, couldn't make the world safe for her.

And yet, they survived. Together. In jokes and songs, in teasing and whispered mantras of jaanam, in shared letters saved in drafts and

hidden folders, they carved a space where fear was acknowledged but not allowed to dominate. A space where love persisted, fragile and resilient, even as the world beyond their screens became increasingly unkind.

The promise remained. Someday, they would meet. And when that day would come, perhaps the world would pause long enough for their hearts to remember the quiet courage of digital love, of whispered jaanams, of strawberry ice cream and laughter carried across continents.

Section 3:

Shadows over

Zehra

By October 2022, the streets of Tehran were alive in a way that made Ahmad's chest tighten just watching through screens. Reports, videos, cries, chants, they streamed relentlessly across news outlets, across Twitter, across Zehra's own live updates. And there she was, in the middle of it, walking among the protests, a figure of fearlessness that made his stomach twist with both pride and terror.

Every night, he called her. Every night, her face appeared on his screen, the flicker of light catching in her hair, in her eyes, in the small, sharp curve of her smile.

"Jaanam," she said softly when she saw his lips tremble, his hands shaking as panic took hold. "You're still awake? Breathe. Breathe with me, okay?"

He tried. He always tried. But watching her move through the chaos, seeing her refusal to hide her hair, her refusal to stay out of danger, it was a weight that pressed into his chest until it felt like his ribs would snap.

“Why won’t you just... cover yourself? Just for me?” His voice was almost a whisper, broken.

She tilted her head, a crooked grin forming despite the tension in the streets behind her. “And hide from the world? Jaanam, the world is already seeing everything. I won’t let it see me less than I am.”

He wanted to scream, to tear the phone from the wall, to somehow make her see reason. Instead, he sighed, ran a hand over his face, and muttered, “You’re impossible.”

“And you love it,” she said, voice teasing but edged with softness, almost pity. “Now calm down, my jaanam. Don’t let the distance destroy you tonight too.”

He wanted to laugh at her mockery, but the tension clung to him, a shadow that refused to leave. So instead, he teased her, a small attempt to hold onto normalcy. “I hope you brought your strawberry ice cream with you to the protests. Child.”

Her laugh came through the crackling video connection, bright and defiant. “I did! And you’re jealous, aren’t you? Admit it.”

“I’m not jealous,” he muttered, though the truth lodged deep in his chest. “I just... I worry, okay? That’s all.”

“You always do,” she whispered, and then, almost abruptly, she sang. Just a line, her favorite lullaby they had shared since 2020. The song cut through the panic like a blade, smooth and soft, steadying him even as his mind raced. “Jaanam... listen. Listen to me. I’m here. I’m okay.”

He nodded, breathing uneven, gripping his phone until his knuckles ached. “Okay, okay...” he said, voice shaking. “But promise me, promise me you’ll be careful tomorrow. Promise me you’ll make it back safe.”

“I promise, jaanam,” she said, voice firm now, carrying a confidence that almost hurt to hear. “But I won’t live in fear for the world’s sake. Or yours. Not like this.”

Ahmad’s heart twisted. He wanted to respect her courage, wanted to admire it from afar, but it was impossible to silence the panic, the dread, the vivid imagining of her face turned pale under the shadow of soldiers or gunfire.

They spoke long into the night. Zehra recounted the rumors of more protests, the crowds gathering, the girls and women marching defiantly, and every story made his chest tighten, made him feel small and helpless. Yet somehow, between the stories, she reminded him to breathe. She hummed quietly. She laughed at his small jokes. She allowed him to tease her about ice cream. She called him jaanam like a shield, like a lifeline, like a prayer.

But as the days passed, the shadow grew. Ahmad could see it even over the jittery screen, Zehra’s eyes carried something sharper now, something heavier, something he couldn’t protect her from. He wanted to reach through the phone, to hold her, to shield her, but he was thousands of miles away, and the world was not a forgiving place.

And still, every night, they clung to their rituals. Song. Laughter. Ice cream teasing. Whispers of jaanam. Dreams of meeting someday.

Ahmad knew, deep in the dark corners of his mind, that their love was beautiful and fragile, a sanctuary against the world, but he also knew it was perilous. Every call could be the last. Every message could carry the weight of fear.

Yet they continued. Because they had to. Because love had become survival. Because he needed her voice, and she needed him. And somewhere between panic and laughter, between ice cream and lullabies, they carved out a world where, for a moment, fear could be tempered by closeness.

But the protests were no longer whispers. They were reality. And reality was closing in fast.

Section 4:

The Preceding

Darkness

From the 10th of January, a new weight settled over Zehra. She didn't speak of it, not to Ahmad, not to anyone. It was a sense of finality, a quiet, pulsing knowledge that the world had grown sharper, that life had begun to tilt toward something she couldn't escape. Every morning, she opened her laptop and began writing letters for him, letters she would never send. Letters meant to guide him, to steady him, to keep him breathing if she was gone.

Jaanam, she wrote in the first line of the earliest note. If I don't make it, read these carefully. Live. Please, live.

She typed as if the words themselves could hold her spirit intact. As she wrote, her mind wandered to Ahmad, imagining his panic, his trembling hands, the way his lips quivered when he tried to speak during their calls. She knew him well enough to know he would crumble if he suspected even a fraction of the danger surrounding her. And she could not, would not, allow that.

Their nightly video calls continued as usual. Each evening, Ahmad would log in, smiling in that tentative, anxious way that made her heart ache. "Jaanam," she would say immediately, soft, melodic, protective. "How are you tonight? Did you sleep?"

"I tried," he said one night, shoulders slumped. "But... you know. Panic. Again."

Her smile faltered, but only slightly. She hummed softly as he sat in silence, counting breaths, trying to anchor himself. "Breathe with me, jaanam. Slowly. In. Out. In. Out." She sang a fragment of their lullaby, a thread tying him to life, to sanity. And somewhere in the cadence of her voice, he found it. A momentary calm, fragile but enough.

During the days, Zehra hid everything. On the 14th of January, an IRGC guard assaulted her. The memory of it, sharp and jagged, echoed in her mind constantly, but she did not tell Ahmad. She could not. Not while he relied on her for his own fragile mental survival. She masked the pain, the bruises, the terror, and in the evening, she appeared on his screen as if nothing had happened.

"Jaanam..." she said during that call, voice light, teasing. "I brought a new song for you tonight."

He smiled, trying to imitate calm, ignoring the slight tremble in his stomach. "You're impossible," he whispered. "Even now, even after everything... impossible."

"I like impossible, remember?" she said, laughter lacing through the tension. "It suits me. And you love it, jaanam. Don't lie."

Ahmad rolled his eyes, muttered something about strawberry ice cream, and she laughed again, a sound that carried across continents, a shield against fear. "You are ridiculous," she said. "Stop worrying. Just listen. Be here with me, just tonight."

Every night from the 10th to the 21st of January, Zehra wept silently after the calls, pressing her hands against her face, wishing he could

be there. She cried in the shadows of her room, tracing his face in memory, imagining his arms around her, her cheek pressed against his chest. But on the screen, she smiled, sang, joked, kept him steady. She took care of him while fracturing herself.

Ahmad noticed something, though. On the 21st of January, 11 PM, during their usual video call, he saw it. The fear in her eyes, flickering in the dim light of her apartment, something sharper than usual, more desperate. "Cover your hair, please. Please, just for tonight." His voice trembled, almost breaking.

"I can't," she whispered, voice firm but haunted. "Not for anyone. Not even you."

He reached through the screen with his words, gripping for control he didn't have. "Please, Zehra... please. I can't... I can't do this without you."

"I know," she said softly, her eyes glimmering with tears she refused to let fall on camera. "I know, jaanam. But listen to me. I'm here. I'm okay. For you. Always for you."

That night, they spoke for hours. He teased her lightly, reminded her of her strawberry ice cream, and she laughed through her fear. But underneath the laughter, the whispered jaanams, and the teasing, the shadow had grown too long.

Ahmad had no idea the letters existed. No idea that she had begun preparing for a world in which he might have to survive without her. All he knew was the pattern: song, laughter, teasing, jaanam, and the faint, gnawing anxiety he couldn't shake even when she smiled.

And in the quiet spaces after their call ended, Zehra pressed her face to her hands, thinking: If I die... if I am gone... he must live. He must find his way. He must survive.

The letters, written with trembling fingers, became her unseen lifeline to him, even as she lived her final days in a reality too cruel for the heart.

Section 5:

Final Night and Loss

It was 11 PM on the 21st of January. Ahmad logged in, as always, expecting the familiar glow of Zehra's face, the soft light spilling across her room, the music, the laughter, the teasing.

But something was different.

Her smile was there, yes, but it faltered at the edges. Her eyes, usually sharp and full of fire, flickered with fear he had never seen before. The glow of the screen revealed her trembling hands as she tucked stray strands of hair behind her ears, over and over, a nervous tic he had never noticed.

"Jaanam..." she said softly. Her voice was steady, but not entirely. "How... are you tonight?"

He froze, his chest tightening immediately. He had been trained by panic to read signs, and this, this tremor in her voice, the slight quiver of her hands, told him the world had pressed too close.

"Zehra... what's wrong?" His voice cracked. "Cover your hair. Please. Just for tonight."

She shook her head, lips pressing into a thin line. "I can't, jaanam... not tonight. Not for anyone. You know I can't. Please... don't..."

"I can't..." His own words failed him. His hands shook violently as he gripped his laptop, as if he could hold the fear at bay by sheer force. "I can't... I can't lose you. Not like this."

Her smile trembled, fragile as ice. She tried to sing, tried to hum a lullaby, tried to laugh lightly at the ice cream joke he threw in to distract them both. "Child," he whispered, teasing her about strawberry ice cream. And she laughed, short, broken, but it did nothing to mask the terror behind her eyes.

They stayed on the call for hours. Ahmad tried everything: counting breaths, teasing her, listening to her song, telling her stories from his day. But a weight pressed down on him, impossible and suffocating. Every time she called him "jaanam", he wanted to crumble and curl into himself. Those two syllables, tender, protective, familiar, were now knives of impending loss.

And then the night ended.

Ahmad's screen went dark. Sleep was impossible. He tossed and turned in his room, imagining her smile, her laughter, her trembling hands. In the quiet, the world outside their screens felt unbearably cruel.

The next morning, the world itself seemed to stop.

He opened Twitter first, as if expecting to see her morning post, a picture, a video, anything. Instead, he saw it: the news, the horrifying confirmation, images circulating, blurred but unmistakable. Zehra had been shot, six times. Six bullets. Six strikes that had taken her from the world, from him.

The phone buzzed. It read Baano (zehra's mother);

"Zehra was shot six times. She is gone."

The words landed in his chest like bricks. His vision blurred. His ears rang. He sank to the floor, stomach heaving, hands shaking, voice lost in the cavern of his own grief. No song. No lullaby. No jaanam to pull him back from the edge.

His panic, always a silent predator, became a roaring flood. He could barely breathe, barely think. His room felt impossibly small, the ceiling pressing down. Every memory of her, the teasing about ice cream, the song, the laughter, the whispered jaanams, burned brighter and sharper, fragments of joy turned into shards in his chest.

He screamed into the empty room, a sound raw and unending. He clawed at his sheets, at his hair, at the space where her presence should have been. The world was hollow. The light from the screen was cold and lifeless. He didn't know how long he stayed there, rocking, crying, whispering her name, praying for impossibilities.

And then, buried somewhere beneath the weight of disbelief, came the letters.

He found them in her laptop, folders labeled by dates, by hopes, by instructions for him if she was gone. He opened one at random.

"Jaanam... if you are reading this, I am gone. Live. Find your way. Remember me, but don't let my absence break you. Live, my love, and laugh at strawberry ice cream as much as we did. You can do this. I believe in you. Always... always..."

He read through them in a blur of tears, a mixture of despair and strange comfort. She had left him a compass for the void, a map through a grief too sharp to navigate alone. And in those letters, her voice, soft, insistent, teasing, loving, still reached him, calling him "jaanam", urging him to breathe, to survive.

Ahmad's world had shattered, irrevocably, and yet, somewhere in the shards, Zehra's love remained. A ghost, a memory, a lifeline. The letters were all that tethered him now to sanity, to hope, to survival.

And he clung to them desperately, as one clings to a hand extended over a cliff's edge, as one clings to the echo of a song that has ended, as one clings to the whisper of "jaanam" that had once saved him every night.

3 THE ROT BENEATH THE SKIN

James was twenty-six when Mary married Chris.
He was twenty-eight when he died.

Two years of rotting. Slowly. Intimately. Like a man embalming himself from the inside out.

Mary had once sworn she'd never leave him. Her voice, breathy and warm in his ear, used to say, "There's no version of the world where I don't choose you." But there was. And she chose it.

She wore ivory silk. Kissed another man. Called it love. James sat quietly in the sixth row, heart locked behind a polite smile, watching it all unfold through the mist of champagne and suppressed screams. Her bouquet. Her laugh. The crowd clapping like a congregation welcoming a resurrection. And when they kissed, he didn't blink. He wanted the image to burn into his corneas. He wanted to die looking.

His two closest friends, Jessica and Joanna, flanked him during the ceremony. Both had begged him not to go. Jessica, with fury. Joanna, with pity. But James insisted. “I want her to know I survived her.”

He didn’t.

That night, the voices stepped in. Not just in his head. In the walls. In the floorboards. Under his nails.

They never left.

From that day on, James lived in two realities. One where the world still turned, and another—quieter, darker—where something was watching. Something that had stolen Mary’s face and wore it like a skin mask.

It whispered to him.

He began pulling his hair out in chunks. Tearing skin from his arms. He swore there were insects crawling beneath it—little beetles whispering her name, MaryMaryMary, like a lullaby made of razors.

He saw her in mirrors. Not reflections of the real Mary—but stretched, rotted versions. Her skin gray and sagging like wet paper. Her eyes twin wells full of writhing larvae. Sometimes she was naked, slick with black blood. Other times, she wore her wedding dress, soaked through with rot, the veil clinging to her face like a shroud. Her mouth would stretch too wide, and she’d whisper things— “You should’ve died in the womb.”

“You were never enough.”

“Why do you think she left you?”

And the worst part—he started to believe her.

He told Joanna. Told her everything, one night when she came over with soup and old photos.

“I see her,” he said, rocking in his chair like a child. “At night. In the mirror. In the drains. She whispers and her mouth doesn’t move right. She’s not her, Jo. She’s something wearing her.”

Joanna looked stricken. “James, that’s not real. That’s grief. You’re traumatized—”

“She said she took my heart out and replaced it with maggots. And I can feel them, Joanna. They’re chewing me up from the inside.”

Jessica showed up two days later, shouting at him through the door. “You need help! Jesus, Jamie, this isn’t romantic, it’s a slow suicide. You’re rotting in there!”

He cracked the door open. Just a sliver. One eye peered through, dark and glassy. “It’s not me rotting,” he whispered. “It’s the whole world. And she’s the worm queen at the center of it.”

Jessica backed away. She never came again.

The hallucinations worsened. Or evolved. He no longer knew the difference.

He found dead birds on his windowsill—mouths open, feathers slick with red. But when he blinked, they were gone. His apartment smelled like copper and piss and something worse. Something ancient. Something that remembered being buried.

He saw Mary crouching on the ceiling one night, her bones cracking backwards as she turned her head to look at him. Her eyes were gone. Just wet holes. Her jaw split downward like a snake’s, unhinged and grinning.

Still, he didn’t scream.

He journaled it. Page after page, frantic scrawl: “She came in through the drain tonight.”

“Her belly is full of teeth.”

“She wears my skin when I sleep.”

“She says I’m already dead.”

“She says the worms are only the beginning.”

Two years.

Two years of watching himself unravel like old bandages on a mummy.

Two years of carrying her voice inside him like a tumor with vocal cords.

Two years of nightmares that bled into daylight and left rot beneath his fingernails.

Until the night of his 28th birthday.

Ashley, James' 16 year old sister, came over the night before, holding cake and wearing hope like perfume.

He didn't answer at first. Then he opened the door, eyes wide, pupils like pins. Skin pale and paper-thin, the veins beneath it twitching like worms.

"Are you okay?" she asked, holding the plate like a peace offering.

He smiled—too wide, too flat. "You remember that story I told you? About the moth that burned itself on a lamp and thought it was a star?"

Ashley hesitated. "Yeah..."

He reached out and brushed her hair from her face. His hands were cold. "I think I found my star. And tomorrow I'm going to fly straight into it."

"Jamie, please don't talk like that—"

"You're a good girl, Ash. You'll be okay. Just... don't open the windows. Not after midnight. That's when they come in."

She tried to call Mom. Tried to stay. But he kissed her forehead and shut the door.

She didn't sleep.

He did.

Forever.

He died on his 28th birthday, arms folded across his chest, mouth still smiling. The empty bottle of sleeping pills rested beside him like a sleeping lover. His journal lay open on the floor. The final page read:

“I can hear her heartbeat in the walls. I’m going to crawl inside it and sleep there.”

The Funeral;

It was held in the grayest church Mary had ever seen. The walls seemed to sweat. The candles trembled like they didn’t want to be there. The coffin was closed. They said it was better that way.

Ashley sat beside it.

Not in the pews. Not among the mourners. But in the front, in a little wooden chair brought in just for her. Her fingers hovered over the sealed lid, trembling. She whispered to it now and then, things no one could hear. She hadn’t spoken to anyone since they found James. Not even her mother.

His mother was gaunt, silent, her rosary clutched like a weapon. His father stared straight ahead, jaw clenched so tight it might shatter. Jessica and Joanna sat behind Ashley, pale and stiff, not speaking. Not breathing, it seemed.

Mary arrived late. A black dress too tight around the ribs. Her face drawn. Her hair perfect, as if she thought looking presentable could undo death. Chris walked behind her like a child hiding from a scolding.

The church fell silent. Whispers followed them down the aisle like flies. “That’s her.”

“She married someone else and left him to rot.”

“He killed himself for her.”

Mary sat in the second row. Not the first. Not near James’s family. But close enough to feel it—the wrongness in the air, thick and warm like breath in her ear.

Ashley didn't look at her.

Not at first.

Then, when the priest droned on about peace and healing and God's plan, Ashley turned, slow as a clock hand. Her eyes were raw. Her lips parted.

"Did you love him?" she asked, just loud enough for Mary to hear.

Mary stiffened. Turned toward the girl. "Ashley..."

"Did you?" the girl repeated, voice sharp now. "When you told him he was everything—was it a lie?"

Mary leaned forward, placing a trembling hand on Ashley's shoulder. "He loved hard. Too hard. I didn't mean to hurt him."

Ashley's eyes narrowed. "But you did."

Mary swallowed. She opened her arms, as if to offer comfort. And Ashley let her.

They hugged.

But it didn't feel like a hug.

Mary's arms tightened, her chin resting against Ashley's hair. Her breath hitched once, twice—and then she heard it. A sound too close, too cold, too wrong. A whisper in Mary's ear from the girl's lips:

"He told me you were pregnant. He said you were carrying a monster."

Mary froze.

Ashley stepped back. Her face blank again. Her eyes somewhere else. As if the thing that had spoken wasn't her. As if she'd just been the mouthpiece.

Mary returned to her seat, knees shaking. When the service ended, she walked up alone. Chris stayed behind.

She placed a white lily on the coffin. Her hand shook. Her lips twitched. She leaned down and whispered, "I'm sorry, James."

Someone later claimed the lily wilted the moment it touched the wood.

As Mary turned to leave, she saw it—just for a second. In the stained-glass window. A smudge. No—a face. Pale. Hanging. Its blackened eyes wide. A mouth open in a jagged smile. Watching her.

She blinked.

It was gone.

That night, she rifled through her unopened mail. One envelope was postmarked three days before James's death. No return address.

Inside: one sentence. Written in jagged, frantic ink.

"You will carry me longer than I ever carried you."

She folded it and slipped it under her pillow.

She did not sleep.

Outside, the wind howled like a man being flayed alive.

And in James's apartment, long abandoned, the ceiling fan spun slowly, groaning on its rusted chain—even though the power had long been cut.

Epilogue: The Promise

Mary went mad before the first trimester ended.

It started small. She forgot words mid-sentence. Heard things in static. Saw shadows move in places shadows shouldn't. The nursery door would creak open every night at exactly 3:13 a.m., even though she'd never touched the hinges. She thought it was just grief. Just guilt. Just nerves.

Then she began waking up on the floor, her hands covered in soil. Her nails blackened. One morning, she found herself kneeling in the garden, digging a hole with her bare fingers, whispering his name over and over like a prayer that curdled halfway through.

Chris begged her to seek help. She screamed at him when he touched her stomach. She said the thing inside was hungry. That it didn't kick—it clawed.

By month five, he was sleeping on the couch. By seven, he left for good. No note. Just silence. The door clicked closed like a judge's gavel. Mary never looked for him.

But Ashley came.

She showed up the day after Chris vanished, suitcase in hand, her eyes hollow but hard. She didn't speak much. Just moved in. Took over. Cleaned the mold off the walls. Threw out the meat Mary left to rot in the sink. Set alarms. Measured vitamins. Rubbed lotion into Mary's swollen feet when the skin began to split. Never with affection. Only with duty.

"You don't have to do this," Mary croaked one night, her voice cracked with exhaustion.

"I promised James," Ashley said.

And that was all.

Mary screamed in her sleep every night. Sometimes she'd wake up on all fours, gnawing the edge of the crib. Once, Ashley found her trying to drown herself in the bathtub, mumbling, "It wants out. It's trying to tunnel out through my spine."

Ashley slapped her that night. Hard. Then held her as she cried.

"Don't you dare die," she said, voice sharp. "You don't get to die easy. Not after what you did."

When the labor came, it came violently.

Mary thrashed on the delivery table like something being exorcised. Nurses screamed when her water broke black. The room smelled like rot and rust. The monitors failed. The power flickered. One nurse swore the infant cast no shadow when it crowned.

At 3:13 a.m., the child was born.

A boy.

Perfectly healthy.

Blue eyes. Quiet. Watchful.

Mary laughed. Then screamed. Then laughed again until she bit off part of her tongue. She wouldn't hold the baby. Wouldn't look at him. Just whispered again and again, "He's back. He's back. He's wearing skin again."

Ashley took the child.

Named him Jem—not James. Jem, for the heart of the word he came from.

Mary didn't leave the hospital. She spoke only to the ceiling, whispered only to walls. When she slept, she whispered with her teeth.

On her last lucid night, she turned to Ashley, eyes wild.

"You think you saved him?"

Ashley said nothing.

Mary laughed. "I didn't birth him. I freed him."

Ashley never spoke to her again.

She raised the boy herself, in a quiet home outside town. And every year, on his birthday, the wind screamed louder than usual. The ceiling fan spun once in the night. And Ashley dreamed of lilies rotting in coffins that were never opened.

Jem never cried as a baby.

But he smiled.

And sometimes, just before he drifted to sleep, he whispered a name.

Not Mama.

Not Ashley.

But Mary.

As if he remembered.

As if he never forgot.

4 THE LAST VISIT; The night before James's suicide

The apartment had grown quieter in the past weeks, like a dying animal trying not to draw predators. James hadn't turned on the lights in three days. The bulbs still worked; he just didn't see the point. Darkness felt honest—more so than his own voice, which he hadn't used in longer than he could remember. He lay curled on the couch, the same blanket pulled over him since the first frost hit. Everything ached. Even memory.

And then—

Three soft knocks.

Not at the door.

Inside.

He turned his head, slowly. The room bent slightly, as if exhaling. And there she was. Sitting on the edge of the bed, the same way she used to, knees folded, back straight, hands clasped gently in her lap. Mary.

James didn't speak.

He didn't move.

Just stared at her as warmth, long-banished, rose in his chest like a forgotten ember.

She smiled at him, that same lopsided, secret smile. Her green scarf was wrapped around her neck, a familiar curl of wool that used to smell like jasmine and cigarette smoke. There was no horror to her presence. Only peace.

"You look cold," she said softly.

James blinked. His lips cracked when he smiled.

"I was waiting for you."

"I know."

"You came back."

"I never really left."

He sat up. The motion took more energy than he thought he had left. Mary rose and walked over to him—barefoot, slow, graceful. The floor made no sound beneath her steps. She sat beside him and he let his head fall gently against her shoulder. She felt solid. Real. Her heartbeat echoed through the side of her neck.

"I thought I had finally gone mad," he said.

"Maybe you have."

"That's okay."

"I know."

"I wanted to hate you for leaving," he whispered. "But I couldn't. You did the right thing."

Mary said nothing for a long time. Then: "I left because I loved you. I couldn't watch you fall through yourself anymore."

He nodded. "You did the right thing."

"But I never stopped loving you, James."

The tears came quietly. They slid from his eyes without a fight and stained her sleeve.

"I wish I had been easier to love."

"You weren't hard," she said. "You were just... heavy. Like a poem no one could finish."

He let out a soft laugh. It hurt.

"I'm so tired, Mary."

"I know," she whispered.

He lifted his head and looked at her. Her face was just as he remembered. No worms. No rot. No nightmare behind her eyes. Just her. Just Mary.

"Can I sleep here?" he asked, voice small as a breath.

"Yes," she said. "Lay your head on my lap."

And so he did.

She ran her fingers through his hair like she used to, slow and steady, untangling every knot of regret. He could smell her again—faint jasmine, warm skin. His breath slowed. His heart softened. For the first time in months, his muscles unclenched.

"You don't have to stay, if it's too late," he said.

"I'll stay," she whispered. "As long as you need."

The apartment held its breath.

And James slipped away.

No belt. No blood. No scream. Just a slow drift, like silt settling in water.

In the morning, they found him on the couch. Peaceful. Eyes closed. Head resting in the center of a flattened cushion, arms wrapped around his chest.

But the most curious thing—the thing the coroner couldn't explain—was the faint indentation beside him. As if someone had sat there all night. Holding him.

And on the coffee table, a green scarf. Warm to the touch. Still smelling of jasmine.

5 When the Rain Sat Still

The rain had been falling for hours—light, persistent, like a whisper the sky couldn't stop repeating. Adam sat on the floor of his apartment, knees pulled to his chest, the soft orange glow of the streetlights leaking through the blinds and painting faint lines across the room. The clock said 11:14 p.m., but time had stopped mattering a long time ago.

It was May 25th.

The place was a quiet chaos. Half-empty mugs, clothes draped over the furniture, books scattered like he'd tried to make sense of something—anything—and given up halfway through. The only sound was the gentle hum of the fridge and the rain tapping the glass like it was trying to get in.

Adam hadn't really spoken to anyone in weeks. His voice felt foreign in his own throat. He stared blankly at the wall, the same wall he talked to every night. Then, without warning, something in the air shifted—softly, like a breath catching in the cold.

A scent.

Lavender and rain.

He looked up.

Jessica was standing in the doorway.

No key. No sound. No warning.

Just there.

Her hair was long and loose, a soft brown halo. She wore the red cardigan he used to tease her about, the one with the stretched sleeves from how she'd pull them over her hands. She looked exactly the same. Like she had been the day she left.

Adam blinked once, twice. "Jessica?"

She didn't speak. Just walked over to the couch and sat down as if she'd done it a thousand times. Legs curled under her. Hands in her lap.

"You're not real," Adam whispered.

She smiled gently. "Does it matter?"

He didn't answer. Just stared at her, breathing shallow. Then he whispered again, voice cracking, "Why now?"

"Because you needed someone," she said.

He knelt slowly in front of her, like approaching something fragile. "I'm not okay, Jess."

"I know," she said softly, brushing the hair from his forehead. "I've been watching you. I saw you trying."

Adam's lips trembled. "Trying what? I'm failing at everything. I can't keep a job. I push people away. I don't even leave this damn apartment unless I run out of food. I'm... I'm a ghost, Jess. A breathing ghost."

She looked at him with eyes full of warmth and sorrow. "You've been surviving. That's not nothing. That's brave."

"I should be over you," he said bitterly. "It's been six years. I told you to go. To be with Chris."

Her voice softened. "You didn't want me to go."

"I wanted to be good. I wanted to be selfless. But the truth is—I died when you left."

She placed her hand on his cheek, thumb brushing his skin like memory. "No, Adam. You didn't die. You just stopped seeing yourself. But I never stopped."

He broke then. The words, the tears, the years of pain—he let it all pour out.

"After you left, everything fell apart. I've tried to reach out but no one stays. They all say 'you'll be okay' and disappear."

Jessica gently pulled him into her lap. "I'm here now."

"I talk to myself," he confessed. "Just to hear a voice. I think about dying, Jess. Not dramatically. Just... slipping away. Quietly. Like it wouldn't matter."

She held him tighter, one hand stroking his hair with the same rhythm she used when he had nightmares. "It matters. You matter. Even when it doesn't feel like it."

"I feel empty. Like I gave myself away to people who took pieces of me and never gave anything back."

Jessica kissed his forehead. "There's still something left. There's still you."

"I don't know who that is anymore. You knew me better than I knew myself. You saw me. And after you, no one did."

"I still see you," she said. "Even now."

His tears soaked through her cardigan, but she didn't flinch. She just rocked him gently. "I wish you'd stayed."

"I wish I could have," she said, voice quiet as rain. "But I'm here now. For this night. For you."

"Do you hate me? For not being enough?"

"No," she said firmly. "You were always enough. I just didn't know how to love you while trying to find myself. That wasn't your fault."

They sat in silence for a while. The kind that says more than words ever could.

Then Jessica leaned back, looking into his eyes. "Do you know what day it is?"

Adam blinked. "May... twenty-fifth?"

She smiled. "Five days."

He frowned. "Five days until what?"

"Your 28th birthday, dummy," she said, chuckling softly. "May 30th. You forgot again."

He let out a weak laugh, half-broken, half-surprised. "I did. I really did."

"You always forget your birthday when you're hurting," she said. "So I remembered it for you."

He didn't speak. Just stared at her, feeling the ache shift, become something gentler.

Jessica looked around the room, then back at him. "Do you want to hear your song?"

Adam swallowed. "You remember?"

"I always remember."

Then, with a voice soft as dusk, she began to hum the first notes. And then she sang;

"I am not the only traveler

Who has not repaid his debt..."

Adam closed his eyes.

"I've been searching for a trail to follow again

Take me back to the night we met..."

Her voice wrapped around him like a warm blanket, like spring breaking through a long winter.

"And then I can tell myself

What the hell I'm supposed to do

And then I can tell myself
Not to ride along with you..."

He rested his head against her, breathing in the scent of lavender
and old memories.

"I had all and then most of you
Some and now none of you
Take me back to the night we met..."

She finished the song with a whisper, her fingers still in his hair.
"You're still here, Adam. And that's enough for today."

"Can I stay like this? Just for a while?"

"As long as you need," she whispered.

So he stayed.

For the first time in years, he felt warmth. Not from the heater. Not
from a blanket. But from her. From being seen, being heard, being
held.

And slowly, the storm inside him calmed. The thoughts quieted.
The ache softened.

He fell asleep in her lap, her hands never leaving his hair.

And for a moment, everything was still.

When Adam woke up, the room was bright with morning light.
The rain had stopped. The apartment was silent.

The couch was empty.

Jessica was gone.

No red cardigan. No scent. No warmth.

Just a faint imprint on the cushion—and the soft ache of goodbye.

But he didn't feel broken.

He sat there, unmoving, for a long time. Then he whispered, with
a tired, grateful smile, "Thank you."

He stood up, washed his face, made himself some toast, and opened
the window.

The air smelled clean.

And somewhere deep inside, where pain and love often get confused, something small and fragile had begun to heal.

In five days, he'd be 28.

And maybe—just maybe—that wasn't such a terrible thing after all.

6 The Last Sunday

It was a quiet Sunday afternoon, the kind that feels like the world is holding its breath. The sky was pale, covered in slow-moving clouds that looked unsure about whether to cry or just pass by. Greg sat on the old wooden bench beneath the tall neem tree—their tree. This was where they first met when they were fifteen, when Jane had laughed at the way he tripped over his shoelaces and offered to teach him how to tie them better, even though he already knew.

Now, seven years later, they were different people. Older, yes. Wiser, maybe. But still carrying the same thread between them—only today, it felt frayed.

Jane was already sitting there, her hands clenched together, her shoulders stiff. She didn't look at him when he arrived.

Greg sat beside her, close enough that their arms brushed, but not too close. Not like before.

He didn't speak right away. He just looked at her hands, her knuckles turning pale from how hard she was squeezing them.

Finally, she said it. "I've been talking to someone."

Her voice was low, almost a whisper, like she was ashamed of the words.

"Jacob," Greg replied softly.

She flinched. "You knew?"

"I'm not stupid, Jane." He gave her a tired smile. "I've seen the way your eyes light up when his name comes on your phone. I've seen you type and delete messages around me, thinking I wouldn't notice."

Tears welled in her eyes, but she looked away.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this," she said. "He's five years older. He's already an engineer. He runs a business with his uncle. He's..." She struggled for words. "He's secure."

Greg nodded. "And I'm not."

"Don't say that." She turned to him, eyes wet. "It's not about money. I still love you."

Greg looked ahead, past the trees, to the quiet path where they'd once walked holding hands and planning a future. "maybe you love the memory of us. Not the reality. Right now, I'm a guy with one year left for college to finish, no job, and no guarantee of anything. And you... you're almost done with engineering. You've got your life lined up. And your sisters need you. You've always carried so much."

Jane said nothing. Her lips trembled.

"I've thought about this a lot," he went on. "I wanted to fight. For us. But I also know love isn't just about feelings. It's about timing, and circumstances, and what we can give each other."

Jane covered her face with her hands, and when the tears came, they came hard. The kind of crying that sounds like a storm trying to escape from inside the body.

Greg reached out, pulled her close. She clung to him, buried her face in his chest, and cried like she was trying to undo the whole world.

"You have my blessing," he whispered. "If he can give you what I can't right now... go. Build your life. Don't feel guilty. I'll be okay."

"No, you won't," she sobbed. "And neither will I."

He kissed her forehead. "We will. Just not together."

They sat like that for a long time, two kids pretending the world hadn't moved on.

When Jane got home that night, her room felt cold. She sat on the edge of her bed, her clothes still damp with Greg's tears—or maybe her own. She looked at her phone, at the last message from Jacob:

"Still thinking about you. You okay?"

She didn't reply. She stared at the screen, then threw the phone on the bed.

Her room was filled with pieces of Greg. The bracelet he made her in school still hung on her lamp. A photo of them at seventeen, grinning like fools, sat on the shelf. She walked over, picked it up, and stared at it.

Her hands began to shake.

What had she done?

She thought about how Greg listened. How he always made time even when he was drowning in assignments. How he walked two miles in the rain once just to bring her medicine. How he remembered little things—her favorite line from a book, the name of her childhood cat, the way she liked her tea.

She had never felt more loved than when she was with him.

Now she had walked away from that—for someone she barely knew, whose life looked shiny on the surface, but didn't carry the warmth of seven years of shared moments.

She curled up on the bed, the photo still in her hand, and cried. Not for what she had now. But for what she had let go.

Back in his room, Greg sat in the dark. No lights. No music. Just the sound of the fan ticking slightly as it turned.

He laid back on the bed, eyes open.

The silence was thick. But then—

“Greg?”

He sat up straight. Her voice. Soft. Close.

“Jane?”

No answer.

He rubbed his eyes. Maybe he was dreaming. Maybe sleep was playing tricks.

He laid back down.

“Do you miss me?”

He turned toward the voice, heart pounding. Empty room. Shadows on the wall.

“Yes,” he whispered.

“Do you still love me?”

He covered his ears. “Stop.”

The voice laughed—her laugh, light and teasing, like how she used to sound on the phone at night.

He curled into himself, pressing the pillow over his head. But her voice was still there.

“Greg... what if I made a mistake?”

His eyes stung. He whispered into the dark, “Then come back.”

But there was no reply. Just the creaking fan. And the echo of a love that refused to leave.

7 Five Days"

Adam hadn't really existed for years—not in the way that matters. His body moved, sure; it went to work, bought groceries, replied "Fine" when asked. But his soul had been in storage since the night he watched Torrie kiss her husband under a canopy of paper lanterns, her white dress fluttering like the wings of something released. Adam had clapped, smiled, even toasted. No one noticed the way his knuckles bled from how hard he gripped the champagne glass.

He had become a ghost long before he died.

Now, five days before his 28th birthday, she was sitting across from him.

Torrie.

She hadn't aged a day since the last time they'd sat like this, knees touching on his old sofa, arguing about music or where to get takeout. Her voice still had the old melody, somewhere between laughter and forgiveness. She was wearing the hoodie he'd stolen from her senior year locker—blue, frayed at the cuffs.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," she said.

"You are one," Adam whispered, unsure if he was asleep, drunk, or just finally unraveling. "You're not real."

"I'm real enough to say what no one else is saying."

He didn't answer. His eyes flicked to the corner where the rope hung behind his coat, looped like a question mark waiting for the end of the sentence. He had written the final line. The days were counting down like a quiet clock in his chest.

"You were supposed to be the one," he said, and it came out like a cough, jagged and rusted. "We were supposed to grow old, and argue over stupid shit, and maybe live in a house with peeling paint and too many cats."

"We were fifteen, Adam."

"We were in love."

Torrie softened, her voice wrapped in the old warmth. "We still are. Somewhere in the bones of time, we still are."

"You married someone else."

"I thought I had to." Her voice faltered. "My mom told me not to. She said I'd never love anyone like I loved you. I told her love wasn't enough anymore."

He laughed bitterly. "She was right."

"Maybe. But you weren't there, Adam. You stopped calling. You drifted. I was scared. And then life happened."

His eyes narrowed. "Life? You mean he happened."

Torrie stood and walked to the window. Rain tapped the glass like it wanted in. "Do you remember my fifteenth birthday?"

His mouth tightened. He remembered too well.

"Your dad's garage," he said. "You had on that ridiculous glitter eyeshadow."

"You kissed me like you were afraid I'd disappear."

"You tasted like strawberry lip gloss and nervous laughter."

She smiled. "You said, 'Happy Birthday, Torrie. You're officially the most beautiful person in this garbage town.'"

"And you said, 'You've got terrible timing, but that was the best birthday present ever.'"

Their laughter was soft, like two ghosts haunting the same memory. Silence folded between them again.

Adam broke it. "I don't want to feel this anymore. The emptiness. The screaming silence when I wake up. The dreams where you're mine again."

"You're not alone."

"You left me."

"I never left. I just stopped being able to reach you."

Adam walked to the closet, opened it, stared into its dark mouth. "You can't fix this."

"Maybe not. But I can remind you of who you were." She moved behind him, gently, as if not to startle a wild animal. "You used to believe in stupid, beautiful things. Like aliens, and fate, and soulmates."

"I believed in you."

"Then believe that I'm here now. That I still care. That I wish—I wish I had said something sooner. That I'd never stopped checking your Facebook. That I waited for a message every year on my birthday. That I cried when you didn't come back after the wedding."

He turned slowly, eyes red and empty. "Then why didn't you call?"

"Because I was afraid you hated me."

"I didn't hate you. I hated me."

The illusion wavered. Torrie looked suddenly older, tired, afraid.

"I'm begging you," she said. "Don't do this. Not because of me. But because once, a long time ago, you were the only reason I didn't jump in front of a train after my dad left. You kept me breathing. Let me return the favor."

He reached out. She felt real.

He held her hand, trembling. "Stay with me."

But she was already fading.

Torrie was slicing strawberries in her sunlit kitchen when the phone rang. She wiped her hands on a dish towel, humming some half-remembered tune from high school. Her wedding band clinked against the ceramic counter as she reached for the phone. She didn't recognize the number right away—her mother's new landline, probably.

She answered with casual ease. "Hey, Mom. Everything okay?"

Silence.

Then the kind of inhale that doesn't belong to breathing but to breaking.

"Torrie..."

Her mother's voice was unsteady. "It's Adam."

Her heart flipped sideways. It had been years since she'd heard his name spoken out loud like that.

Her mother's voice cracked. "He's gone, baby. He—he took his life last night."

For a second, the kitchen disappeared. The world turned paper-thin.

"No," Torrie said flatly, as if correcting a stranger. "No, that's not—what?"

"He hung himself," her mother whispered. "He left a note. It said... it said he'd held on long enough. That he didn't want to wake up alone on his birthday again."

Torrie staggered back, the knife clattering to the floor.

"I saw him," she whispered. "A few nights ago. He was... I thought I was dreaming."

Her mother's voice was raw. "You need to come. I'll pick you up."

The grave was new, the soil dark and turned, like something torn open too soon. No headstone yet—just a temporary marker, the kind used when death is still fresh and bureaucracy slower than grief.

Torrie stood over it like a statue too heartbroken to crumble. She had on a black raincoat, though the sun peeked through the clouds. Her mother stood a few feet back, giving her daughter the space she never should've needed.

She knelt.

Hands trembling, she reached out and touched the dirt. Still soft. Still unsettled.

"Adam," she whispered.

There was no answer. Not even wind.

"I wished you had called me," her voice quivered, barely louder than breath. "I would've been there. I swear to God, I would've come running."

She reached into her bag and pulled out the photograph—their old polaroid from her fifteenth birthday. Both of them red-faced from laughter, him grinning like someone who thought forever was real. She placed it gently on the grave like a fragile relic, something sacred and lost.

"You kissed me that night," she said, choking back a sob. "Right by the garage, remember? I told you you had terrible timing. You said you didn't want to waste another second not loving me."

She bent lower, until her cheek was against the earth.

"I never stopped loving you. I just got scared. I thought I had to grow up, move on, do what people expected. But I checked your profile every year. I waited for a message. Even on my wedding night, I kept hoping you'd crash it. I wanted you to stop me."

She hugged the grave.

Her voice broke open, raw and real. "I'm sorry. I'm so goddamn sorry. For everything I didn't say. For letting you believe I didn't care. I never stopped caring. I still wear your hoodie some nights. I still hear your voice in songs. I still see you in my dreams."

Her mother stepped closer now, quietly, laying a single flower on the grave. A marigold—Adam's favorite. "He always said orange made sadness look embarrassed," she'd once overheard him say.

Torrie ran her fingers across the damp soil like she was stroking his hair, calming him to sleep.

"I hope wherever you are," she whispered, "you're finally at peace. But damn it, I wish you'd waited. Just one more day. One more call. One more second."

The sky began to mist.

But Torrie stayed, curled against the earth as though she could still cradle him, still stop the rope, still change the ending.

As though love could still reach six feet under.

8 THE MAN WHO WOULDN'T LEAVE THE KITCHEN FLOOR

James didn't remember when the nights first turned against him. At some point, sleep stopped being rest and became a doorway—one he dreaded opening. By the time he realized it, the door was already inside him.

It began with the panic.

Not the kind people talk about casually—the “I’m stressed” kind. No, this was surgical. Precise. It would arrive without warning, tighten around his ribs like a vise, and whisper to his body that it was dying.

His heart would sprint, his fingers would numb, and his thoughts would scatter like frightened birds hitting glass.

He learned the shape of his kitchen floor intimately.

Cold tile. Slight crack near the sink. A stain he never scrubbed out.

That's where he was the first night he saw him.

James had curled into himself, forehead pressed to the ground, whispering, "Please stop, please stop," to no one in particular. His chest burned, his lungs forgot how to be lungs, and the silence of his apartment grew teeth.

Then—

"Bit dramatic, don't you think?"

James froze.

The voice was soft. Familiar in a way that didn't make sense.

He turned his head slowly.

There, leaning against the counter like he'd always belonged there, was a man in suspenders. Slightly disheveled. Kind eyes. A crooked half-smile.

"Robin?" James whispered, his voice cracking.

The man tilted his head. "That's what they used to call me."

James blinked hard. Once. Twice.

The man didn't disappear.

At first, James thought it was a dream bleeding into waking.

Or maybe waking bleeding into dream.

It didn't matter.

Because Robin stayed.

He sat with him on the kitchen floor during the second panic attack that night, humming something off-key and ridiculous. He passed him an imaginary mug of cocoa James couldn't hold, but somehow still felt warmth from.

“Breathe,” Robin said gently. “In. Out. That’s the whole job tonight.”

James tried.

God, he tried.

The dreams didn’t stop.

The woman came every night.

Two faces—one soft, luminous, the other hollow and weeping. Love and loss fused into something monstrous. She spoke in riddles at first. Then in accusations. Then in commands.

“I am everything you ever loved.”

“I am what you couldn’t keep.”

“Let me carve it out of you.”

James would wake clawing at his chest, gasping, trembling so violently the bed shook beneath him.

Robin would always be there.

Sometimes sitting at the edge of the bed.

Sometimes crouched beside him.

Once, absurdly, wearing a chef’s hat.

“Well,” Robin said that night, gesturing at James’s shaking hands, “if this is a cooking show, we’ve definitely burned the soufflé.”

James let out a broken laugh.

It hurt. But it was real.

Days passed. Or maybe they didn’t.

Time lost its edges.

James stopped checking his phone.

No messages came anyway.

He stopped answering the rare ones that did.

People drifted away quietly, like they’d been waiting for permission.

He gave it to them.

"I ruin things," he told Robin one afternoon, sitting in the dim light of his living room.

Robin shook his head. "No. You just don't know how to ask people to stay."

James stared at him. "Same difference."

"No," Robin said softly. "One is a flaw. The other is a wound."

One night, the panic didn't come like a storm.

It came like silence.

Heavy. Final.

James laid on the bed, staring at the ceiling, feeling... nothing.

No fear. No fight. Just a hollow quiet.

The woman appeared again.

This time, she didn't attack.

She smiled.

"You're ready," she said, her voice perfectly calm.

James didn't argue.

He didn't have the energy.

"You're right," he whispered.

From somewhere—distant, almost fading—Robin's voice cut in.

"No."

James turned his head.

Robin stood in the doorway.

Not smiling this time.

Not joking.

Just... there.

"You don't get to leave without hearing this," he said, stepping closer.

James swallowed. "I'm tired."

"I know."

"I don't matter."

Robin's expression broke—just slightly.

"I notice you," he said.

James shook his head weakly. "That's not enough."

"It is tonight."

The woman stepped forward, her two faces flickering. "He's done. You know he is."

Robin didn't even look at her.

He sat down beside James and placed a hand—warm, impossibly real—on his shoulder.

"Then we'll just do one more night," he said quietly.

James's eyes filled.

"I can't keep doing this."

"You don't have to keep doing forever," Robin replied. "Just tonight."

The woman's smile faltered.

James closed his eyes.

His chest still hurt. His body still trembled. The emptiness still loomed.

But beneath it—

Something else.

Small.

Annoying.

Persistent.

A flicker.

When he opened his eyes again, the room was still there.

The ceiling.

The cracked paint.

The quiet.

The woman was gone.

Robin leaned back in the chair, exhaling dramatically. "Well, that was a bit of a mess, wasn't it?"

James let out a shaky breath.

"...you're not real, are you?"

Robin grinned. "Define real."

James almost smiled.

That night, something changed.

Not louder. Not sharper.

Just... quieter.

James sat on the kitchen floor, back against the cabinet, blanket hanging loosely off one shoulder like it had given up too. The clock blinked 3:17 a.m. in dull red numbers. The kind of time that doesn't feel real.

His phone lay beside him.

Dark.

He didn't pick it up anymore.

Didn't check.

Didn't hope.

Hope had become a kind of cruelty he no longer trusted.

Robin sat across from him, cross-legged, uncharacteristically still.

No jokes.

No humming.

Just watching.

James spoke first.

"I think this is it."

Robin didn't interrupt.

Didn't rush to fix it.

James let his head fall back against the cabinet, eyes half-open, unfocused.

"It's not even pain anymore," he said quietly. "It's just... empty. Like something packed up and left without telling me."

Robin swallowed, but said nothing.

James let out a small, humorless breath.

"I used to think rock bottom would feel dramatic. Like breaking glass. Screaming. Something loud."

He shook his head slightly.

"But this?"

A pause.

"This is just... silence that doesn't care if I'm in it."

The room felt smaller.

Or maybe James was just... fading inside it.

"I don't think anyone would notice," he added, almost as an after-thought.

Robin flinched.

"I would."

James didn't look at him.

"You don't count."

That landed.

Hard.

Robin's voice, when it came, was softer than it had ever been.

"I count to me."

James closed his eyes.

For a moment, it looked like he might cry.

But even that didn't come.

"I'm so tired, man," he whispered.

Robin shifted closer, slowly, like approaching something fragile that might shatter at a sound.

"I know."

"I don't want to fight anymore."

"You don't have to fight forever."

James shook his head faintly.

"I don't even want 'better.' I just want... nothing."

That was the first time Robin didn't have a clever reply.

Didn't have a story.

Didn't have a line to soften it.

He just sat there.

And for the first time—

he looked afraid.

The air in the room shifted.

James's breathing slowed.

Too slow.

His body slackened against the cabinet, the tension draining out of him in a way that didn't feel like relief.

Robin leaned forward.

"Hey," he said gently. "Stay with me."

No response.

"James."

Nothing.

Robin reached out—hand hovering for just a second before touching his shoulder.

Still warm.

But distant.

Like touching someone through glass.

"Hey," Robin said again, a little firmer now. "Come on. Not like this. Not quietly."

James's lips parted slightly.

A faint breath.

Barely there.

Robin's voice cracked.

"You don't get to disappear like a whisper, okay? You're louder than that. You hear me? You're—"

He stopped.

Because something was wrong.

Not sudden.

Not violent.

Just... slipping.

Like a tide pulling back too far.

The clock blinked.

3:18.

Too bright for the hour. Too certain.

Robin didn't trust it.

Time shouldn't look that steady when something was ending.

His hand was still on James's shoulder, but even that felt... wrong now. Not in placement—no, that was the only thing that hadn't changed—but in sensation.

Less resistance.

Less... there.

"Hey," he said, softer than before. Careful, like speaking too loudly might scatter whatever was left of him.

"Stay with me."

James's chest rose.

A pause.

Fell.

Robin waited for the next breath.

It came late.

Too late.

A small fracture formed somewhere behind his ribs.

"This isn't funny anymore," he whispered, forcing something light into his voice and failing completely. "You've committed to the bit long enough."

Nothing.

Not even the faint twitch James used to have when he was half-listening, half-lost.

Robin leaned closer, searching his face.

There was no panic there anymore.

No tightness in the jaw.

No fight clawing its way to the surface.

Just... quiet.

A quiet so complete it felt like it had swallowed everything else.

"You said you hated this," Robin murmured. "Remember? You said silence was the worst part."

His voice wavered.

"You said it felt like disappearing."

The word hung there.

Disappearing.

Robin swallowed.

"Don't prove yourself right like this."

For a moment—

just a flicker—

James's lips parted.

A breath slipped out.

So soft it almost didn't belong to the world anymore.

Robin froze.

"That's it," he said quickly, leaning in, desperate now for anything that resembled response. "Yeah, okay—there you are. Just keep doing

that. That's all you have to do. You don't have to fix anything, you don't have to—"

The next breath didn't come.

Robin waited.

Counted without meaning to.

One.

Two.

Three—

It came.

Shallow.

Late.

Like it had lost the way back.

Robin's hand tightened, just slightly.

"Hey," he said again, but now there was something else in it. Something thin. Fraying.

"You're drifting."

The kitchen seemed to stretch.

The walls pulling back, the corners dimming—not darker, just... less certain. Like the room itself was forgetting how to hold shape.

The hum of the refrigerator stuttered, or maybe Robin only imagined that it did.

Everything felt... out of sync.

Like the world was continuing somewhere else, and this—this small square of tile and failing breath—had been left behind.

"James," Robin said, more firmly now.

Still gentle.

Always gentle.

But firmer.

"You don't get to go somewhere I can't follow."

The words landed heavier than he expected.

Because for the first time—

he wasn't sure they were true.

James's head shifted slightly against the cabinet.

Not a movement.

Just gravity remembering him.

Robin watched it happen like it meant everything.

"Yeah," he said quickly, clinging to it. "Okay. Good. That's—yeah.

Stay here. Stay right here."

But James's eyes...

They weren't focusing anymore.

Not on him.

Not on anything.

Just open enough to suggest they had been, once.

Robin felt something cold slip through him.

Not fear.

Not exactly.

Something quieter.

Something that didn't ask permission before settling in.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "No, don't do that. Don't look past me."

He shifted closer, almost kneeling now, bringing himself directly into James's line of sight.

"I'm right here."

Nothing.

"I'm right—"

His voice broke.

He tried again, softer this time.

"I'm still here."

The words echoed strangely.

Not in the room.

In him.

Like they weren't landing where they were supposed to.

Robin exhaled slowly, unevenly, and for the first time, his hand wavered on James's shoulder.

Not pulling away.

Just... unsure.

"You always said I wasn't real," he whispered.

A small, hollow smile ghosted across his face.

"Guess that makes this easier for you, huh?"

No answer.

Of course not.

Robin looked down at the floor—the crack near the sink, the stain that never quite came out—and then back at James.

"You picked a terrible place to leave," he murmured. "No scenery. No music. Not even a decent goodbye line."

He let out a breath that almost turned into a laugh and didn't.

"Very on-brand."

Silence pressed in.

He reached out again, adjusting the blanket slipping from James's shoulder, tucking it in carefully—too carefully, like precision might hold something together that was already unraveling.

His fingers lingered there.

Longer than necessary.

As if memorizing warmth.

Except—

It wasn't as warm anymore.

Robin stilled.

"...hey."

He didn't say it loudly.

Didn't say it urgently.

Just... said it.

Like a question he already knew the answer to.

The clock blinked.

3:19.

Robin stared at him.

Really stared.

And slowly, something in his expression changed.

Not shock.

Not even grief.

Just a quiet, devastating recognition.

Like watching the last light go out in a house you thought was still occupied.

“Oh,” he said softly.

It wasn’t a realization.

It was a surrender to one.

The room felt larger now.

Or emptier.

Maybe those were the same thing.

Robin leaned back against the cabinet, mirroring James again, their shoulders almost touching.

Almost.

“I thought I had more time,” he admitted, barely above a whisper.

The refrigerator hummed.

The light buzzed.

Somewhere far away, a car passed, tires whispering against asphalt, a life continuing without hesitation.

Robin tilted his head slightly, eyes still on James.

“You were supposed to hate the quiet longer than this.”

His voice thinned.

“You were supposed to fight me on it.”

Nothing.

Not even the suggestion of breath now.

Robin let the silence settle.

Didn't push against it.

Didn't try to fill it.

For once—

he let it be exactly what it was.

After a long while, he spoke again.

Very gently.

"You made it through tonight."

A pause.

Then, softer—

"...I just didn't realize that was the finish line."

The clock blinked.

3:20.

Robin's gaze drifted, just for a second—

and when it returned—

there was something less of him there.

Fainter.

Like he, too, was beginning to follow a path he couldn't quite see.

He looked at James one last time.

Not smiling.

Not joking.

Just... there.

"Guess I'll see you," he murmured.

He didn't finish the sentence.

Didn't need to.

Because the kitchen—

the clock—

the cold tile beneath them—

kept going.

And James didn't.

And after a while—

it became harder to tell if Robin did either.

The knock came too softly the first time.

Jacob was the one who did it—two polite taps, like James might be asleep inside, like everything could still be explained with something small and human.

No answer.

He glanced back at the others.

Maria stood with her arms folded too tightly, her thumb worrying the edge of her sleeve. Richard shifted his weight from foot to foot, already restless, already uneasy. Jennifer stared at the door like it had personally offended her.

Ashlee didn't move.

"Try again," she said.

Her voice wasn't sharp. Not yet. Just... thin.

Jacob knocked louder this time.

"James?" he called, forcing something light into it. "Oi, mate, open up."

Silence.

Ashlee stepped forward and hit the door with the flat of her palm.

"James."

Not a request.

A demand.

Still nothing.

Richard exhaled sharply. "He's probably just out."

"No," Ashlee said immediately.

Too quickly.

Too certain.

“He’s not.”

Jennifer frowned. “You don’t know that—”

“I do.”

That same thinness—but now it had an edge.

Ashlee reached for the handle.

Locked.

Of course it was.

Her hand stayed there a second too long, fingers tightening slowly, like she could will it open if she just... tried hard enough.

Jacob pulled out his phone. “I’ll call him.”

It rang.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

They all heard it.

Faint.

Muffled.

Inside.

Ashlee’s head snapped up.

“Again.”

Jacob called again.

And there it was—

clearer now.

From inside the flat.

From somewhere deeper in.

Ashlee’s breath hitched.

“He’s in there.”

Richard stepped forward. “Alright, step back.”

“What are you—”

The shoulder hit the door hard.

Once.

Twice.

The wood groaned.

On the third hit, the lock gave.

The door swung open with a hollow crack.

The apartment smelled... wrong.

Not rot.

Not decay.

Just—

stale.

Like air that hadn't been moved in days.

Like something had stopped happening here.

Ashlee pushed past them before anyone could say a word.

"James?"

Her voice echoed too much.

Too empty.

The living room was dim, curtains half-drawn. A blanket lay crumpled on the floor. His phone buzzed weakly in Jacob's hand behind her.

"James!"

She moved faster now—into the hallway, glancing into his bedroom.

Bed unmade.

Sheets twisted.

No one there.

Her pulse climbed, sharp and sudden.

"James, this isn't funny!"

The words came out louder than she meant.

They hit the walls and fell flat.
Maria hovered near the doorway. "Ashlee—maybe just—"
"No," she snapped. "He's here. He has to be."
She turned—
Kitchen.
Of course.
Her feet slowed without her permission as she stepped toward it.
Something in her chest—
tightened.
Not panic.
Not yet.
Just... resistance.
Like her body already knew something her mind hadn't caught up
to.
"Ash..." Jacob started quietly behind her.
She didn't listen.
She stepped into the kitchen.

Empty.
That was the first thing.
Not physically.
No—the table was there, the counter, the stupid crack near the sink
James used to complain about.
But it felt empty.
Like the room had been... drained.
Ashlee's eyes scanned it quickly.
Too quickly.
Like if she moved fast enough, she wouldn't have to see anything.
No one on the floor.
No one slumped against the cabinets.

No—

nothing.

Her breath came out in a short, confused burst.

“...what?”

She took another step in.

Then another.

“James?”

Softer now.

Smaller.

Her gaze dropped.

The floor.

Cold tile.

There—

The blanket.

Folded.

Carefully.

Too carefully.

Ashlee stared at it.

Her mind snagged on something.

James didn't fold things.

He left them.

Everywhere.

Always.

Her throat tightened.

“No.”

She shook her head once.

Hard.

“No, no, no—he's—he's just—he's gone out. He's—he's fine.”

No one answered her.

Behind her, the others had gone quiet.

Too quiet.

Ashlee turned back toward them, something frantic rising now, something desperate and sharp.

“Say something.”

No one did.

Maria’s eyes were wet.

Jennifer looked away.

Richard’s jaw was clenched so tight it trembled.

Jacob just... stood there.

And that—

that broke something.

“Don’t do that,” Ashlee said, her voice cracking suddenly.

“Don’t—don’t look at me like that. He’s not—he’s not—”

She laughed.

A short, brittle sound that didn’t belong to her.

“He probably just went for a walk. Or—God, I don’t know—coffee, or—”

Her voice wavered.

She turned back to the kitchen like it could fix it.

Like it could give her something normal.

Her eyes landed on the counter.

A mug.

Empty.

Placed neatly beside the sink.

Ashlee stepped closer.

Her fingers hovered over it.

Didn’t touch.

“Since when does he clean up after himself?” she whispered.

No answer.

Of course not.

Her chest started to rise and fall too fast now.

The air felt wrong.

Too thin.

Too tight.

“He wouldn’t just leave,” she said, louder now, turning back again.

“He wouldn’t just—what, disappear? That’s not—he’s not—”

Her words tangled.

Collapsed.

Because a thought had finally forced its way through.

Not loud.

Not dramatic.

Just—

inevitable.

“He wouldn’t go without telling me.”

Silence.

Ashlee’s lips parted.

Her eyes darted around the room like the answer might be hidden somewhere obvious.

Like she’d just missed it.

“He wouldn’t.”

Her voice dropped to a whisper.

“He promised.”

That was it.

That was the thing that shattered.

Not a scream.

Not yet.

Just—

the realization that the promise had nowhere to land anymore.

Her knees buckled slightly, and she caught herself on the edge of the counter.

"I told him," she said, breath hitching. "I told him to call me if it got bad again. I told him—"

Her voice broke completely now.

"I told him I'd come."

Maria stepped forward. "Ashlee—"

"Don't."

Sharp.

Immediate.

Ashlee shook her head violently.

"No, don't—you don't get to say that like you understand. You don't—you didn't hear him. You didn't—"

Her words dissolved into a strangled sound.

Half sob.

Half breath.

"I knew," she whispered suddenly.

The room stilled.

"I knew something was wrong."

Her hands gripped the counter harder.

"I just—I thought he'd—he always—he always makes it through, doesn't he?"

No one answered.

Because no one could.

Ashlee's shoulders started to shake.

Small at first.

Then harder.

"I should've come sooner."

There it was.

The blame.

It settled into her voice like it had always been waiting.

"I should've—why didn't I—why didn't I just—"

Her breath hitched violently now.

Her chest tightening.

Her hands trembling.

“I knew.”

The words came out louder this time.

Angrier.

“I knew and I didn’t come!”

She slammed her fist against the counter.

Once.

Twice.

“I was busy,” she spat, the word turning bitter in her mouth. “Busy with what? Nothing. Nothing that mattered—”

“Ashlee—”

“NO!”

The scream ripped out of her, raw and sudden.

Everyone flinched.

“I was supposed to be here!”

Her voice cracked into something jagged.

“I’m his sister—I’m supposed to—”

She choked.

The words collapsing under the weight of something too big to say.

Her legs gave out completely this time.

She sank to the floor.

Right there in the kitchen.

Right where—

Her breath hitched again.

A realization hitting her all over again.

The floor.

She looked down at it.

At the tile.

At the crack near the sink.
Her hand reached out slowly.
Touched it.
Cold.
Too cold.
“This is where he was, isn’t it?”
No one answered.
They didn’t have to.
Ashlee let out a broken, animal sound.
Her fingers pressed harder into the tile, like she could feel something left behind.
Like she could rewind it.
Undo it.
“I left him here,” she whispered.
Her voice was gone now.
Barely sound.
“I left him here alone.”
Tears fell freely now, hitting the floor in small, helpless drops.
“I told him I’d come.”
Her shoulders shook violently.
“I told him...”
The sentence never finished.
Because there was nothing left to say.
Around her, the others stood frozen—grief hanging thick and useless in the air.
But Ashlee—
Ashlee folded in on herself completely.
Curled over the cold tile like she was trying to take his place.
Like if she stayed there long enough—
he might come back and find her instead.

End.